

i wrote you a letter (i might never send it)

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Rating:	Mature
Archive Warnings:	Graphic Depictions Of Violence , Rape/Non-Con
Category:	Gen
Fandoms:	Dream SMP , Minecraft (Video Game) , im not writing rpf ao3 just hates me
Relationships:	Wilbur Soot & Technoblade & TommyInnit & Phil Watson , Tommyinnit & Toby Smith Tubbo , Clay Dream & TommyInnit , Clay Dream & Technoblade , Ranboo & TommyInnit , Niki Nihachu & Technoblade , Ranboo & Technoblade , Niki Nihachu & Ranboo , Clay Dream/GeorgeNotFound
Characters:	Technoblade (Video Blogging RPF) , TommyInnit (Video Blogging RPF) , Phil Watson (Video Blogging RPF) , Wilbur Soot , Ranboo (Video Blogging RPF) , Niki Nihachu , Clay Dream (Video Blogging RPF) , Alexis Quackity , Floris Fundy , GeorgeNotFound (Video Blogging RPF) , Darryl Noveschosch , mm dont like the way ao3 does tags sometimes , Sapnap (Video Blogging RPF) , Grayson Purpled (Video Blogging RPF) , Cara CaptainPuffy , Jack Manifold , Charlie Dalgleish Slimecicle , Connor ConnorEatsPants
Additional Tags:	Hurt/Comfort , Resurrection , Alternate Universe - Canon Divergence , Angst , Dark , Mental Health Issues , Depression , Blood and Violence , Rape , past/present and to a minor , Dysfunctional Family , lots of family dysfunction hoo boy , Dead Dove: Do Not Eat , basically if anything sounds triggering! don't read it thanks! , Resurrected Wilbur Soot , Winged Wilbur Soot , Piglin Hybrid Technoblade (Video Blogging RPF) , Trans Technoblade (Video Blogging RPF) , Winged Niki Nihachu , Enderman-Ghast Hybrid Ranboo (Video Blogging RPF) , Trans Ranboo (Video Blogging RPF) , Winged TommyInnit (Video Blogging RPF) , smacks this fic. this mf can hold so many winged folks, generally everything on the first fic also applies here, specific warnings will be in chapter notes, everyone's sad. , Possessed Clay Dream (Video Blogging RPF) , its not a plot twist anymore lads!
Language:	English
Series:	Part 2 of things that grow in the snow: main series
Collections:	em's to read list , Completed stories I've read
Stats:	Published: 2021-05-01 Completed: 2022-08-27 Words: 145,280 Chapters: 21/21

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by [DeathSquiggles](#), [hydrangeasheart](#)

Summary

Resurrections are tricky, risky business.

(A canon-divergent AU fic, and a direct sequel for "to be a wanderer, wandering")

Notes

does a funky little dance second fic time. it's happening. wild.

im so excited to get into the resurrection arc!!! the dark themes!!! the pain!!!

i want to insist that you *heed the warnings*. if anything there seems triggering or like it's too much for you, please don't read. they're not going to be present in every chapter, but they will come up.

and if you read it despite these warnings and get upset by it, you can't say i didn't warn you, more than once. do not comment hateful things, i'm just going to delete them.

with that being said! please take this first chapter. there's going to be some leadup into actual resurrection time, so i hope you can bear with me :-') also you're going to be subject to fuckin. nether worldbuilding. i am a simple man, with a simple hyperfixation on block game hell.

specific warnings for this chapter: violence, burns, references to past trauma, and a dash of fantastical discrimination :-') for spice, for the vibes.

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

a long way down

“Do we have any blaze powder?”

“Hm?” Techno doesn’t take his eyes from the window, staring out at the grey midday sky and the fresh, undisturbed snow. He could swear that he saw something retreating into the treeline...

Phil chuckles next to him and nudges his arm. “Do we have any *blaze powder* , Tech?”

He blinks and looks away from the window, frowning. “Uh... I don’t think so. I’ll go check.” He grabs his glasses off the table and slides them on.

(He needs a distraction, really. He can’t just stare out the window and worry for hours. There’s probably nothing out there.)

(Well. Maybe Dream. But... he can handle that. He’s accepted the fact that *he’s* watching them. But the idea of *someone else*? It’s a bit... *worrying* .)

He drops down into the storage room, and hums lightly as he kneels down by the chest full of potion ingredients.

Does he have blaze powder left? He *must* , right? He hasn’t brewed potions in a while, but surely he didn’t use *all* of it.

He pushes things aside, frowning.

Or maybe I did , he thinks, picking up the empty jar that only has the lightest dust of orange-gold along the inside of the glass.

Dammit. Well, he did make a *lot* of potions. Just a glance at the chest he stored them in shows that he definitely could have used a lot of blaze powder. (He crushed so many blaze rods for that. Hours of slaughtering. And he used *all* of it? God.)

He pushes himself up from the floor, jar in hand, only wincing a little as his chest gives a faint pang.

“We’re out,” he informs Phil once he’s upstairs again, setting the jar down on the table. “I can go get more.”

He glances up from the paper he’s transcribing symbols onto. His brows furrow and his wings hitch up a little. “I don’t know if you should. Your ribs, and...”

Techno raises a brow. “I’ve fought with broken ribs before. And I’m the only one here who’s *meant* for the Nether.”

“Piglins aren’t native to the Nether, though, are they?” Ranboo asks curiously, from where he’s sitting on the kitchen floor with one of the cats, dangling a length of ribbon for her to bat

at. “‘Cause they’re not fire resistant, and anything that’s *meant* to be there is. Like ghosts.” He giggles when the cat gets one of her claws stuck in it and shakes her paw aggressively to dislodge it.

He huffs. “Details, details.” He’s probably right, though, from his fuzzy memories of listening to older piglins talk. Though, those could just be the ramblings of aging creatures... “It won’t be a tough trip, the nearest fortress is pretty close to the portal I have out here.”

Phil sighs, going back to his drawing, carefully rendering the sigils in ink. “I guess it’ll be fine. Just... be as careful as possible?”

Techno grins. “Of course.”

Finally. He hasn’t gotten to go out and *do* anything in ages. The most activity he’s been able to do is sew and help with house chores, which are... boring. He’s bored.

And if there’s one thing he’s learned, is that he’s never able to cope with boredom very well.

He gets dressed in tight-fitting but not overly warm clothes, and secures his armor. He gathers supplies together-- milk and potions and food, mostly. He makes sure his crown is securely placed atop his braided hair, and starts his way towards the cavern his portal is contained in.

He has both his axe and sword on him, along with his pick, just in case he needs it. He’s *so* ready to kill some blazes.

“Where are you off to?” Niki asks, just stepping out of her front door. She’s fully dressed for the weather, wrapped up in the blue cloak he made for her, and the sight makes him lightly satisfied.

Techno hums. “Nether trip. Phil needs blaze powder.”

She smiles, bouncing on her toes. “Could I... could I maybe come with you?” Her wings twitch up a little and her smile turns shy. “Unless you want to be alone, of course, I just... it sounds kind of fun.”

He raises a brow, surprised to find a smile on his face. “I mean, as long as you’ve got good armor and don’t mind killin’ blazes with me.”

Her smile turns into an outright grin. “I don’t mind at all. Give me just a minute to get ready!”

She disappears back into the house. Techno grins to himself and actually forces himself to stand near the house and wait, even though both his instincts and the voices are calling for *violence time violence time!*

Usually, he’d go on a trip like this alone, but... he likes doing things with Niki. Even something as simple as reading together is nice. And, who knows. Maybe having someone else there will keep him from spiraling or hyperfocusing, as he tends to do when he’s in his home dimension.

Less than five minutes later, Niki returns from inside the house, dressed in different clothes, under armor in gleaming iron with the exception of her gold helmet, and carrying only a knife, small but wickedly sharp.

They fall into step together, crushing the snow down under their boots. The quiet companionship is nice.

It's odd to think that he actually has... *friends* , now. A new part of the family, really. Is Niki family? He thinks she might be part of their family. If she *wants* to be.

(*He* wants her to be. He's always kind of wanted a little sister.)

Techno brushes aside the snow that's collected on the ledge of the cavern's entrance and climbs up, holding a hand down to help Niki do the same.

The space is mostly barren, and very dark. He scrunches up his face and goes to light one of the torches, handing it over to Niki, before lighting one for himself.

No monsters, only the gleaming-shimmering portal at the back of the cavern. The energy of the thing is probably keeping them at bay; they don't stray too close.

Or, well, not *usually*. He once watched a particularly bold creeper wander right through one, and fall into a giant lava lake. It was pretty funny, if he's being honest.

"C'mon," he says, leading Niki to the portal. She looks at it warily as it shimmers and swirls. "Are you scared?"

"No," she says, tone confident. Her wings twitch out behind her. "...maybe a *little* bit. I haven't spent much time in the Nether."

Techno gives a light smile and pats her shoulder. "You'll be perfectly safe with me. Mostly because it'll be real embarrassin' if I let you die in my home dimension."

She giggles and shakes her head. "I guess. I'll stay close, then."

His tail flicks in amusement. She's plenty armored, and he's seen her fight pretty competently, but... she only has a knife.

He takes his axe off his back and holds it out to her. "Here, take this."

She frowns at the weapon, brows furrowing. "Are you sure?" She asks, glancing up at him. "It's *your* axe..."

"You'll need more than just a knife if we're fightin' blazes, Niki." He gives her his most genuine smile. It pulls at one of the scars on his cheek. "It's fine, you can use it."

She takes it, fingerless-gloved hands wrapping around the handle.

She tests its weight in her grasp, and her face spreads in a grin, just shy of glee. "It's really light..."

He nods, a spark of pride in his chest at her excitement. "It's enchanted, and fairly new, too. So it should be perfect."

She raises her head and carefully holds the weapon. Her eyes are sparkling. "Thank you."

He shrugs, and gestures at the portal. "After you."

They emerge into a crimson forest. The sharp scent of burning meat and the hypnotic warmth of the dimension settles on Techno's senses like a morbid blanket. The sound of lava flowing and popping fills his ears, along with the stretching ambience and the low din of the creatures.

The portal is situated just under the canopy of one of the fungi, and it allows them some cover while orienting themselves.

Just outside the safety of their fungi, a group of piglins run after a hoglin, their leader (armed with a crossbow and wearing full armor) snorting instructions. He can't quite catch all of it, but there's something about a hunting formation.

Niki steps closer to him, holding her axe so tightly her knuckles are white.

He draws his sword, and motions for her to follow him out. The vegetation underfoot makes a soft crunching sound as they walk.

They're at the edge of the forest, mere feet from where it drops off into a lava lake. A cluster of striders are evidently just below the ledge, making small noises to each other; from here, he can only hear them. Nothing hostile seems to be around, save the hunting party behind them.

"Fortress is that way," he says, nodding toward the gloom of a waste, roughly east. "But there's a shortcut, if you don't mind a bit of annoyin' terrain."

She shakes her head. "I don't mind."

He leads her around the edge of the forest, walking parallel to the lava lake.

When he passes the hunting party, now sitting on a fallen stem and cleaning their kill, he nods respectfully.

The leader glances at him, and then at Niki's wings. They huff and return the nod.

"You can understand them, right?" She asks, head tilted curiously. "Piglins have an actual language, don't they?"

He snorts. "Yeah, I can. And they do." He shakes his head. "Probably in our best interests to avoid a conversation, though."

"Why?"

"They're not particularly fond of humans, of any kind. And even less of hybrids like me."

“Oh...” she trails off, frowning. “That makes sense. Humans are cruel.”

“Mhm. And if you believe the stories, they’re the reason they’re all stuck here.” He shrugs, brushing aside a cluster of particularly long tendrils spiralling off one of the fungi so they can pass below it. “But yeah, they don’t like me. There’s a reason there aren’t many piglin-human hybrids.”

Niki hums in agreement, ducking under the tendrils.

They walk in silence until they come to the edge of the soul sand valley. It’s the very tail end of the biome, a slice of dark sand and glowing blue fire, not far at all to walk, and it leads right to the fortress.

Sure, they have to struggle through the sand, but he has enchanted boots. Niki doesn’t, though...

Techno raises his brows, glancing down at her. “Want me to carry you?”

She muffles a laugh in her hand. “Very funny. No, I’ll walk, just don’t leave me behind.”

He shakes his head. “Never. Come on, then. It helps if you take small steps.”

“Really?” She asks dubiously.

They slowly make their way across the sand. Techno takes purposefully smaller strides so he doesn’t lose track of Niki, even as his eyes scan the terrain for trouble.

Even with as vigilant as he is, she notices the arrow coming for them first. She doesn’t verbally warn him-- she just chirps in alarm and pushes him aside, as the arrow whizzes past.

He balances himself, head whipping towards the offending skeleton. It walks toward them with all the grace of a reanimated form, feet somehow not catching on the sand, bony hands grasping its bow.

“Keep walking,” he says to her, striding over to the skeleton. “I’ll handle it.”

She does as told, protectively holding her axe.

His lip curls in a snarl as he raises his sword and slashes it across the skeleton’s spine, just below its ribcage.

It has the intended effect-- it falls apart, and the sand shivers, pulling the bones down into the hungry depths, faces distorting as they sink. Its bow is left sitting on the top of the sand, arrow still strung.

Its skull goes last, teeth chattering and the flash of light in its eye sockets rolling around.

Another emerges from behind a dune, rattling and moving with less grace. It’s just as easy to dispatch, and the sand seems even more eager to swallow it.

He returns to Niki's side. They're close to the edge of the biome now, the edge of the fortress and it's open bridge in sight.

Niki picks an arrow from the side of her pants, frowning. "It missed my leg, but now there's a hole in my pants..."

Techno tries not to laugh. "Skeletons have *horrible* aim."

"They don't have *eyes*, how are they supposed to have good aim?" She muffles a laugh in her glove and keeps walking, kicking the creeping sand away from her boots.

The ridge is in sight, a small scramble up a wall of dense netherrack before they can get on the fortress bridge. He can still hear skeletons, and the far-off cry of a ghast, but they don't seem close enough to harm them.

"You lived here for a long time, didn't you?" Niki asks, swinging the axe a little at her side. "What did you eat?"

Techno scrunches his nose at the memories. "Most of the plants are edible, if you cook them. And if I ever *got* it, hoglin is pretty good. Strider isn't, though. It's too tough and doesn't really taste that good."

"Really?" Her curiosity is genuine, and it makes his ears burn. "I'd guess that strider would be easiest to get, because they're passive..."

He kicks a clump of shuddering sand and bone away from their path. "It's easy to get, yeah, but they're too lean."

(The first time he killed a strider, he was too excited and hungry to even care how terrible the meat tasted and *felt* in his mouth.)

They're at the ridge. The surface of the netherrack is textured and easy to climb.

He lets Niki go first, taking her axe so she can scale the wall. She easily does it, climbing up in moments, so he hands the axe back to her and pulls himself up.

(He remembers how hard it was to get used to all the climbing when he was little. Trying to climb tall cliffs when you're scarcely over *three feet tall* isn't easy.

He got used to it, though. Climbing became as easy as anything else, and even now, he climbs with more grace than his height and build would suggest.)

"That's the fortress?" Niki asks, nodding towards the imposing structure. "I've, um. Never actually *been* in one."

Techno huffs, adjusting his armor and tightening his braces. "I've been in plenty." Even after fourteen years, the scars on his face sting with memories. "Just stay close to me."

She nods firmly, stepping to his side.

He's suddenly aware of how *small* she seems. Not in a cruel way, but just... in the way he usually notices how fragile avians seem to be. He knows she's strong-- he's seen her fight before-- but there's a sudden knot of concern in his chest.

(If he inspects it, he'd probably find that it's the same concern that he feels for Phil and Tommy, the same concern he used to feel for Wilbur.)

(Goddamn *birds* , making his instincts go wild.)

He takes a measured breath, and steps onto the bridge of the fortress. He can tell, as soon as his feet meet the dark bricks, that no sane being would call this place *home*.

He's not as attuned to magic as he would like to be, but the particular brand of... *living space* that the Nether conjures is *evident* , sinking into the marrow of his bones and the roots of his hair. He can almost feel it breathe, the subtle shift implied in the haze of heat over every surface, the rush of hot air through the biomes, rustling the crimson and the warped and the sand and the hardened netherrack, oh so reminiscent of flesh in its tone.

He's waxing poetic again, but it's all true.

Niki takes his hand once she joins him on the bridge. "I'll, um. I'll let go if we need to fight." Her voice is a little shaky. "O-or if you want me to." When he glances down at her, he can see that, despite the heat, her face is pale.

Techno shakes his head, squeezing her hand in a way he hopes is reassuring. "It's fine. C'mon, I know where the spawner is."

As they walk, he keeps his attention focused on the edges of the bridge. Wither skeletons tend to like the edges, the thick, short railings. But there's nothing.

The bridge leads into a room containing a staircase. The room itself is encased in netherrack on the outside; the staircase leads up to another level and a short hallway before a bridge, and there's another hallway underneath it.

Techno pauses to kneel next to the beds of soul sand and pluck nether wart from it's grasp. The faces shift and shiver as he pulls the fungus out.

"That's where it grows?" Niki asks, crouching next to him. "Does all of it grow in fortresses?"

He takes a small length of thin cloth from his bag and wraps the plants in it, before tucking them into a side pocket. "Some of it grows in the valleys and along the lakes, but most of it is here. I think it used to grow more wild, but..." he waves a hand vaguely as he stands up. "The Nether's been through a lot."

"I can imagine," she says, following him to the staircase. Her hand has returned to his, and her wings shift against her back. "Do you know who built the fortresses? Piglins?"

He tries to recall stories he heard while still living here, along with things he's read. Despite the dimension being well-explored, there's woefully little written about it; it's seen as crass,

unclean topics. (One of Wilbur's friends, when they were younger, had remarked on that. Techno had bitten his tongue until it bled.)

"I think it was humans," he says carefully, picking through the memories and books in his mind. "And endermen, too. There used to be a lot of them here." The hallway at the top of the staircase is empty, save for a chest. "Nothin' good in there, by the way. Already looted it."

"Good to know," she says. "Did they... hm, I'm trying to remember. Bastion remnants, I think they're called, did humans and endermen build those too? I read that piglins live in those."

The annoyed snort he gives is pure instinct. She giggles. "Yeah, they do. And I think it was just humans, for bastions."

There's not much about piglins, in overworld writings. They're seen as especially lowly, instinct-driven mobs, which is something that makes Techno want to bite something or some *one*. He has little softness for the mobs he shares blood with, but they're a developed species, with rules and culture and social behaviors beyond anything else in the dimension. He *respects* them.

("You can't join," the man at the gate said curtly, blocking his way with his body.

"Excuse me?" Techno asked. He was young and short and perpetually wild-haired, full of densely packed aggression and an above-average skill in swordplay. "Flyer said it was open to all over thirteen. I'm *fourteen*."

The man looked him over. He was human, clearly, through and through, which he found odd. Very few full humans are still around.

"Your *kind* aren't allowed to participate in our events," he said, slowly, as if thinking Techno couldn't understand him before. "Hostile hybrids, Nether ones especially, aren't allowed to join."

His anger flared and he gripped his sword, the front edge of his velvet cape, which hung a size or so too big on his narrow shoulders. "What the hell kind of rule is that?" He snapped. "Give me one good reason I can't fight in your tournament."

He rolled his eyes, only making him angrier. "You're too violent, too uncontrolled. It takes little to set your kind off, and we don't want anyone being permanently maimed because piglins are sore losers."

Techno's temper only rose, and he let out an annoyed squeal.

In retrospect, he was probably only proving the man's point. But, fueled by righteous anger, he slammed the pommel of his sword against the center of his chest, winding him and causing something to *crack* audibly, before turning and storming away.

"Did you get in?" Dream asked, waiting at the exit of the server. He had already been through one of this server's events, that was the reason Techno even knew about it. He was looking

forward to it.

“No,” he said shortly. “Apparently, Nether hybrids are too aggressive and uncontrolled.” He jerked his head at the exit door, disguising a portal. “I’m goin’ home.”)

Lost in his musings, Techno almost doesn’t notice the familiar clacking of bony feet on the brick floor behind them, rising the stairs.

But he does when he hears the *teeth* , grinding and gnashing.

“Techno,” Niki says, her hand tightening around his. “What’s that noise?”

He grips his sword and fights the same, instinctual panic he always does when he encounters one of the blackened, quick-moving corpses. “Wither skeleton. Get ahead of me.”

She obeys immediately, picking up her pace and hurrying ahead, fingers slipping from his own.

He doesn’t give the skeleton time to strike first. He’s *not* going to go through withering again.

He turns around, swift and dangerous, and his sword marks sharp contact with the creature’s ribcage. It cracks, black bones crumbling, and it lets out an irritated rattle.

He bares his teeth and yanks the sword back, swinging it right into it’s spine, wrapped in just a few strands of black, stringy flesh.

He hit it just right, between two vertebrae. It chatters at him, hands flying to it’s broken spine, but it crumbles, sword clattering to the bricks just before it’s bones.

Another is right behind it. He snarls and slashes it’s spine as adeptly as he slayed it’s companion.

Their bones mingle on the bricks. The later one’s hand still clutches it’s sword.

His face stings with remembered pain and he swears that he can feel the long ago yet remembered feeling of the wither crawling along his face. He draws in a ragged breath that tastes of charcoal and burnt meat.

He whips back around and follows Niki, grip tight around the sword’s handle. He’s trembling, a little.

He still doesn’t like those damn things.

-

Niki holds her axe tightly in her hands, the soft inside of her gloves damp with sweat, and not just from the heat of the dimension.

Her parents only let her go into the Nether once. She was... fourteen? Fifteen? Somewhere in there.

They were going into a fortress. She... lied, a little, saying she had never been in one.

Her parents wanted to try potion making. It was a natural evolution of their love of baking and cooking, she supposes. And their growing interest in magic...

She was in charge of keeping track of their blaze rods. Her parents gave the shiny, warm sticks of pure orange-gold to her, and she had to hold them wrapped in a thick cloth as to not burn her hands.

She didn't like how that place made her *feel*. Trapped and small and-- scared.

And then the ghast...

She hears one cry in reality and jolts, some kind of animal instinct making her whirl around with the axe raised.

The only creature in sight is Technoblade, who raises an eyebrow at her. He was just out of her reach.

Niki swallows thickly, her throat feeling tight as if she's on the verge of tears. Going to the Nether wasn't a good idea. Why did she think she could handle it?

"It's okay," he says, calm as ever. She lowers the weapon and holds it close, protectively. "The ghast's far away, don't worry about it."

She nods jerkily. "Right. Where's the spawner?" Before she can stop herself, she adds, "I just want to get out of here, actually."

His eyebrows both raise this time, and his eyes flicker in the light of the ever-present fire. "Same," he says after a moment of consideration. "It's just outside the next room. Here, take..." He swings the small bag off his back and pulls a glass bottle out of it. It's just about half full with a shimmery, orangey liquid. "This."

She does, taking the surprisingly cold potion from him. "What is it?"

"Fire resistance," he explains, taking another for himself. "It doesn't last too long, but we can knock a lot of blazes out in that time."

She nods, uncorking the potion and taking a hesitant sip of it. It's... cool, and tastes like peppermint. It leaves her mouth tingling a little. She drinks the rest of it, feeling the odd, tingling coolness spread throughout her throat and down into her belly. It's weird, but not unmanageable.

Techno takes the empty bottle and puts it back in the bag, along with his own empty potion. They click together.

They walk in silence, down the bridge, avoiding gaps in the bricks that show the bright lava lake below. She tries to avoid fleeting thoughts of falling down into it.

She curls her hands around the handle of the axe. Even with it being made of dangerous-looking, thick netherite, it's surprisingly light in her hands, and when she swung it earlier... she felt *powerful*.

(She's beginning to realize how strong she is. How capable she is of causing harm.

She's been having nightmares about hurting Quackity for a month now.)

She can hear the grinding, wheezing breaths as they step into a small room with a well of lava in the center. Through an open archway and up a staircase, she can see the twisting, bright forms of blazes, surrounding their eternal spawner.

"Ready?" Techno asks, gesturing at the entryway with his sword. It's engraved with the same gold flowers that decorate her weapon. A mark of it's creator-- she's fairly sure she saw the flowers, the curling vines and roses, on his crossbow during the festival.

Niki grits her teeth to steel herself for the fight, against the memories. "Yeah, let's do it."

He instructs her to linger near the doorway, and let him bait the creatures down. It's similar to the tactic she remembers her parents using, so she accepts it, positioning herself next to the arch and watching as Techno ascends the stairs.

Within seconds, she can hear the sound of fireballs launching and metallic grinding, along with the swing of a sword.

He hops back down the stairs easily, blazes chasing him. "Niki!" he calls, and she steps into the doorway, her axe poised.

One of the creatures sees her, and breathes out harshly in anger. Fire collects around its body, preparing to attack.

She closes her eyes against the glare of the flames and swings her axe through the creature's fiery body, catching one of its rotating rods and sending it back from her. Techno is engaged with two of them, fighting them off skillfully, a grin on his face.

Niki feels herself grin a little as well when she dispatches the blaze in three strikes. That feeling of power rises in her again.

She's *dangerous*.

They fight without words, without communication; Techno somehow seems to know exactly when she needs to be covered, and Niki finds that she feels the same way, stepping nimbly to strike the fire beasts back from him.

She's never felt so comfortable in a fight.

When fire comes at her, she does her best to avoid it, but with the potion in her system, even the flames that make contact don't burn her, only imparting fleeting warmth. It's amazing.

They must kill dozens of the things before a *single* other word is said.

Techno catches Niki's wrist. "The potion should be wearin' off soon," he says. "Help me grab the rods, and we'll get out of here."

She nods in agreement, breathing heavy from the exertion, yet somehow not noticeably sweating. Must be the potion...

They take turns picking up the rods, one of them guarding the other while they grab them. Her anxiety has melted; she isn't even scared of the strange energy of the structure. She isn't helpless. She's *powerful*. And even if she wasn't, she has... a friend guarding her.

Techno holds out his bag to contain the glowing blaze rods, and they take off from the spawner room. Niki finds herself still grinning, even with ash on her clothes and her armor crooked and her knuckles grazed.

They walk across the bridge. Her head is raised proudly, her entire body buzzing. The confidence must be infectious, because her companion follows her example, raising his own head as he walks, his strong shoulders squared. You wouldn't be able to tell that he's such a broken man.

She's been thinking a lot about what little she's been able to learn about his childhood. About how he was apparently just... *alone*, in the Nether, for years. She can't imagine what that was like.

Even just watching his body language now, it's evident in how tense he is that this dimension still scares him. He's jumpy, his tail flicking often, his ears twitching and raising in response to noises she can't hear.

"What was it like?" Niki asks without thinking. "Living here when you were so young?"

Techno flinches once, blinking, before raising a hand to scratch his cheek. "Not... terrible," he says carefully. "I mean, it was scary, and I ended up goin' through a lot more than anyone that little should..." As he walks, he takes measured steps, instinctively dodging the gaps in the bricks. "But I survived, and I learned a lot of stuff that's useful now."

She nods in acknowledgment. "I can't imagine living here when you were... six, you said? How often did you even get *hurt* here?"

His tail sways behind them and he fiddles with his sword. "Really often," he admits. "I was pretty much always hurt. Even if it was just bumps and scrapes... I was *small*. I was an easy target."

Her heart hurts at the idea of a six-year-old Techno running away from monsters two times, three times, four times his size.

When she was little, she didn't get hurt a lot. Her parents disapproved of her playing rough in the forest surrounding their house, even if they weren't willing to play with her themselves.

She occasionally got scrapes and cuts from running around the house or on the porch, or from falling during her make-believe games, but her first major injury was when she hurt her wings at thirteen.

She winces at the memory, shifting her wings against muscle-deep pain. "I'm sorry," she says softly, reaching over to take Techno's hand.

He scrunches his nose slightly. "It's fine. It was a long time ago now."

She can feel the faintest of tremors in his hand. She squeezes it and he squeezes back, eyes on the bridge in front of them.

She hears the cry a second too late.

Something explodes, sending bricks flying and a horrible shock of pain through her left leg. She goes down yelling out in fear, her axe falling at her side with a horrible clang.

Another cry, and then another explosion, this one followed by a deathly scream.

Niki turns on the bridge, fingers fumbling down to her leg.

The armor that was wrapped around her shin is entirely gone, and her pant leg is singed away below the knee.

Her skin is raw and burnt, red and shiny, inflamed. The burn is deep and long, from just below her knee to the top of her low boots. When her fingers brush the injury, she jerks them away with a cry muffled by her lip between her teeth.

Techno kneels next to her, a hand settling on her back between her wings. "It's okay," he soothes. "It's not too bad."

She hates burns. Even little ones, like the ones she occasionally gets baking-- they feel *horrible*, stinging and hot and screaming.

"Here, let me--" she chirps in alarm as Techno hooks his arms around her body, easily lifting her, carefully avoiding crushing her wings. She instinctively loops her arm around his neck and grabs onto his chestplate. "We need to get you out here, hold on to me."

She nods, before something occurs to her and she frowns. "You're not supposed to be carrying anything heavy," she scolds halfheartedly. It has little effect when she's clinging to him and she's not sure she could walk with the pain she's feeling.

He grins a little, crouching with her in his arms to let her grab the axe. "You're not heavy, Niki. And I'm healed enough to carry things, c'mon."

He starts walking. They were almost in the room with the staircase, so he quickly descends it, carrying her as easily as he wields his sword.

Niki has to ignore her urge to pout as she's carried along the second bridge.

That urge disappears when she hears rattling again. She goes tense, rigid in her friend's arms, as it gets closer.

"Shit," he mutters. He shifts his hold on her. "Can't outrun them... I'm gonna put you down, alright?"

Hurriedly, he sits her down on the bridge near one of the thick railings. He draws his sword again and turns somewhat jerkily towards the advancing skeletons.

Wither skeletons, blackened, cruel-looking things. One of them has a jaw that's only hanging on by a strand of tough flesh, another has a shriveled mass cradled inside its ribcage that might be decaying organs, while the other four have bones that simply don't look *right* for a humanoid form.

Niki holds her axe closely, her leg screaming with pain from the burn. They all seem to be ignoring her, more focused on Techno, now dispatching the skeletons with quick, precise movements. It's almost elegant, how he uses his sword to sever their limbs, their spines, even knocking one of their heads off.

Wait, no. They're not all ignoring her. The one with the hanging jaw turns, and jolts towards her, sword bearing arm raised and steps clacking as it advances.

She digs her teeth into her lower lip.

Techno is too engaged with the four skeletons that are mobbing him. The one with the shriveled lump inside of it is in pieces, its skull detached, laying on the edge of the bridge, inches from tipping into the lava.

She's going to have to fight it.

She stands shakily, tears welling in her eyes as she puts pressure on her burnt leg. She wraps her hands securely around the handle of the axe as the skeleton draws closer.

She stares at it, at the tiny white pinpricks of light in its eye sockets, the way it tries to gnash its teeth with its dislocated jaw and instead just snaps at nothing.

Techno lets out an angry snort as one of their swords glances off his chestplate.

Niki grits her teeth, steadies her stance, and swings her axe in a deadly arc.

It catches the skeleton in the shoulder, the one connected to its sword-arm, making the bones crumble under the pressure. The pricks of light in its eyes roll as it swings its sword at her with no precision, but she jerks back when a lucky swing almost grazes her arm.

She uses her axe to sever its spine, and then bat it away with the flat side of the blade.

It stumbles drunkenly as it moves away from her, before falling to the ground and almost seeming to shatter like broken glass, bones flying away in pieces and its head actually

bursting.

She struggles over to Techno's side, and together, they dispatch the last two skeletons.

"Dammit," he mutters, brushing his fingers over his chestplate. There's a large black mark down the purple surface. "Did it cut you?"

Niki shakes her head. "No."

"Good," he says, looking at her with concern in his eyes, glimmering in the flames around them. "Wither is... nasty business."

He picks her up again, and she doesn't argue with it this time. Her leg is almost numb with pain, and she's shaking from the close encounter.

Techno carries her down the bridge. He doesn't go down the wall of netherrack, instead turning to the left and walking along a small path just along a drop-off.

"Where are we going?" Niki asks, looking around hesitantly.

"There's a warped forest over here. I can treat your burn enough for you to be able to walk home."

She wonders what another fungal forest will do to help her burn, but she doesn't argue this time, either.

By the time they make it to the forest, far further than she expected, she can tell he's starting to feel the effects of carrying her. His arms are a little twitchy and he keeps grimacing when he thinks she's not looking.

She kind of wants to say "I told you so", but she holds back.

He sets her down next to a particularly tall giant fungus. With practiced movements, he selects one of the nearby spiraling vines, and cuts it down with his sword.

He kneels next to her. "Give me your leg."

She carefully raises it and sets it over his lap.

She's confused when he slices the vine in half along its length with a slick sound, and sets one of the halves aside. It's gooey and translucent inside, strands of odd slime sticking the pieces together as he pulls them apart.

"What are you doing?" she asks, hesitant and feeling an odd urge to move her leg away.

"Dealin' with your burn," he says, sounding distracted.

He cups his hand around the back of her calf carefully, to avoid hurting her, and places the gooey vine against the burn. She instinctively jerks back a little and makes a disgusted noise at the feeling.

“I-isn’t that poisonous?” She asks.

He shakes his head, pressing the vine more firmly against her leg. “Nah. It’s pretty good for treatin’ burns. Figured that out ages ago. Only poisonous if you eat it raw or leave it on your skin for too long.”

She lets out a trembling exhale. It doesn’t seem to be hurting her-- in fact, it feels kind of nice, soothing almost. The searing heat of the burn seems to be leaching out more and more as the piece of fungus lays over her skin, and it numbs the pain. Huh.

After a few minutes, Techno pulls the vine away. It only covered about half of her burn, but instead of placing the other half on her, he opens his bag to grab a clean cloth and a roll of bandages.

He first spreads the odd slime along the length of the burn, letting it sit for another moment, before wiping it clean with the cloth. When the very slightly blue-tinted goo is wiped away, Niki can see how the formerly red, raw burn is dimmed down to a pink, still tender but not nearly as itchy or painful or hot.

He wraps her leg in bandages, and pats her leg. “All patched up. Can you get up?”

He rises and helps steady her. Her legs hold her just fine-- she can barely feel the pain, just a slight twitch of it as she puts pressure on her leg.

“That’s amazing,” she murmurs, looking at the teal plants with more appreciation now. “Did you figure that out when you were little?”

He nods. “Yeah. It was pretty useful.” There’s a faint trace of longing on his expression. “C’mon, this way to the portal.”

“Why don’t you bring any of the vines back home with you?” She asks, as they make their way through the densely forested biome. There seem to be no creatures other than endermen, walking quietly through the “trees”.

“They’ll go bad in the overworld,” he explains, wiping the slime off his sword with the cloth before tucking it in his bag again. “It’s not warm enough. Nether wart’s a little different, I think it was cultivated to survive a little longer. But any of these plants just go rancid in days.”

She nods, tucking away the information. “Did you learn all this stuff by yourself?”

He shrugs. “Lot of it, yeah. Not a lot about the Nether in overworld stuff.” His lip pulls up in a faint snarl. “But I’ve met a few people who were studyin’ it, and we shared information. So I’ve got a lot of knowledge about this place.” He raises a hand to almost reverently run it along a nearby stem, tracing his fingers along the spirals.

She smiles. “Maybe you can tell me more about it, sometime.”

He glances down at her, almost suspicious. “Really?”

“Yeah!” She says, entirely earnest. “I think it’s interesting. Most people don’t really talk too kindly about the Nether, but you seem... respectful of it, I guess?”

He keeps looking at her, definitely suspicious now, but he gives a slow nod. They walk in silence for a moment, coming up on the edge of the biome and the dimmer glow of the neighboring one, the crimson one they emerged into. She recognizes it.

Techno mutters something. Niki just barely catches it.

“Of course I respect it. It can *hear* us.”

-

Moonlight slants through the window, just bright enough to read by. It highlights the words on the worn page.

Pour the mixture of blaze powder and water into a bowl.

Stir until it’s combined.

Add regeneration potion and bonemeal, stir until it’s thickened and cohesive.

Trap it in an airtight container.

Phil runs his fingers over the writing, inspecting his own notes around the old, elegant text.

“Make sure there are no solid pieces of bone or blaze rod left, it ruins the whole process...” he murmurs along as he reads, finger underneath the faded line of ink. “Let it sit for at least two days in pure darkness...”

He rubs his temples.

When Niki and Techno came home from their trip to the Nether-- he hadn’t expected her to go with, but they both seem happy with it-- and gave up the blaze rods, Phil had methodically crushed them into powder and transferred the remains into the glass jar.

He had done it with more force than strictly needed.

He’s on edge. It’s like his body and mind are remembering how drastically horrible this turned out last time.

But it will be easier this time. He can feel it. Wilbur isn’t-- as far gone. He’s still himself, even as a ghost. His mind has been damaged, but not *corrupted*, not like Kristen’s was.

It’s... it’s going to work.

He pours the thick mixture, a pure white with a shimmer of orange to it, into the low glass container, usually used for holding potion ingredients. It closes securely and it’s the most airtight container they own.

He runs his fingers over the lid of the box.

He's scared. He's not too proud to admit that. He's tired and he's scared and the idea of this not working, of having to go through that again when his life is finally okay again-- with his family close and bigger than before, even-- makes him want to cry.

But he made a promise, and god, he owes Wilbur that simple respect, of fulfilling that promise.

He places the box behind their thickest stack of books, where no light shines.

Two days is perfect. The full moon rises two nights from now.

That will be a *perfect* night for a resurrection.

no light, no light, in your bright blue eyes

Chapter Notes

and just like this. it's resurrection time. it gets... dark. a bit shorter than usual, but the action moves faster. there's a Lot to it.

no long preamble this time. it's just. time to get into the shitshow, lads.

warnings for blood, self-harm (technically for magic purposes but, eh), injury, and some body horror. (you get a bit of momza lore in this chapter. i'm just feeding you.)

title from no light, no light by florence and the machine

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Tommy picks at his sleeve, watching with his legs crossed on the couch cushion.

The way Phil carefully dips the wide paintbrush into the ritual paint, his brows furrowed, his lips curled in a frown, almost seems... like art. The exact picture of a worried, determined man, kneeling on the floorboards, about to do something immoral, impossible, irresponsible.

He hasn't said a word ever since dinner was finished. He's been quietly, steadily painting the symbols.

Ranboo is on the couch next to him, writing in his book, but he seems distracted. "That paint is so *bright*," he mutters with slight irritation, glancing at the container of paint with narrowed eyes. "I can't look at it for too long..."

Tommy looks at the paint as well. It's... incredibly white, and a little shiny, but it's not painful to look at. "Really?" He asks, brows furrowing. "Is it glowing or something?"

He uses the end of his pen to scratch his cheek. There's a faint burn on it, due to a particularly rude clump of snow falling off the roof while they were outside, just as he was looking up. "Yeah...? Can't you see it?"

He shakes his head. "Nope, it's just white paint."

He scrunches his nose. (It's an annoyed trait he inexplicably shares with Techno.) "Huh."

"You've got, like, weird vision though," he suggests, shrugging as he settles better on the cushion. "Not just the whole inverted colors thing either. Can't endermen see in the dark? Maybe you just have weird eyes."

Ranboo giggles a little and elbows him. “Pffft, maybe.” He goes back to his writing, his pen scratching quietly at the paper.

Niki comes inside from where she was sitting on the porch. “The moon’s pretty well up by now,” she informs, brushing ice off of her skirt as she goes to kneel next to Phil. “The paint’s fine, isn’t it?”

Phil nods, fiddling with the brush. He finishes one of the last lines of the sigil.

Tommy isn’t sure of the meaning of all the symbols, odd things, some sharp and others curly. Ranboo called a few of them out as ender characters, but only a very select ones.

He tried to read the resurrection book Phil’s been pouring over, but it must be in some kind of code, because not a single word was recognizable, or in some language that nobody but Philza Minecraft would take the time to learn.

“Oh, it’s almost done!” Ghostbur says cheerfully, looking up from the book he was reading on the floor near the window. “Aaah, I’m excited!” He shakes his fists in front of his chest and his wings flap idly behind him.

Niki smiles, a little thin. “I don’t know why you’re so excited about this,” she says gently. “It’s not going to be very fun.”

“I’m excited to be *alive*,” he clarifies. “Getting stabbed again isn’t going to be all that great, but! If it works, I’ll be alive.”

She shakes her head and looks back down at the symbols. “Are they done?” She asks, touching Phil’s hand. He nods, and she gets to her feet. “I’ll go get Techno, then.”

She walks to the ladder to the loft, and climbs up.

Tommy leans forward on the couch. “So, what are you actually going to *do*?” He asks Phil, not really expecting an answer.

He sighs deeply and raises a hand to rub his brow, smearing the smallest bit of paint in his skin. His eyes are troubled and he looks exhausted.

“Once these symbols are given blood,” he begins explaining, sounding tired, “they’ll provide enough energy, and enough of a gateway,” *and what the fuck is that supposed to mean?*, “that I can try and bring Wilbur back, by reenacting his death.”

His hand goes over to brush over the sword, fingers dragging along the blue diamond blade. “It... it might not work,” he says, quieter. “You two might not want to be in here. It’ll be pretty grisly.”

“I can handle grisly,” Tommy says confidently. “I’ve seen all kinds of horrible things.”

Ranboo chirps. “I’m going to go hide our room, actually.” When he glances up at him, brows raised, he frowns. “Magic gives me a headache.”

“Fair,” he concedes. “And you don’t like blood, do you?”

He shakes his head. “Nope, it’s gross.” He gets up, closing his book. “I’ll be out once... everything is done.” He winces, rubbing his cheek. He goes into their room, and closes the door securely.

Tommy is left alone on the couch. (Lame.)

Techno and Niki come down from the loft.

Suddenly, all sense of lightness disappears from the room.

Ghostbur clasps his hands in front of himself. “So, how do we begin?” he says, showing the slightest bit of tact by not sounding *as* cheerful. “

Phil rises from the floor, cringing a little as he pauses to stretch. (*Old bones* , Tommy considers commentating, but he doesn’t think it’s appropriate.)

“You need to stand right here,” he says, gesturing to the largest symbol. “And... well, the next part is me.”

Ghostbur does as told, stepping into the middle of the sigil. “I’ll just stand here?”

Phil nods, a little jerkily. He stoops to grab the sword. “Niki, you have the book, right?”

Niki holds up the book, turned to a page full of strange symbols and words. “This passage?” she asks to confirm, receiving another nod.

Techno frowns, eyebrows furrowing. “Is there anything I can do?” He asks, voice a little soft.

He shakes his head and turns the sword in his hand. “You’re here... mostly for support. In case we need you.”

He nods slowly. “Makes sense.” He sits next to Tommy on the couch, fidgeting with a loose edge of the bandage around his wrist.

Tommy takes the liberty of grabbing his hand and intertwining their fingers. He doesn’t look over at him, but he gently squeezes his hand.

Phil takes a slow breath, and pulls up his sleeve, revealing the multitude of scars on his arm. His pale skin is ravaged with them, in various shades of deep reds and pale pinks. Just looking at them, Tommy feels a little sick. Most of them look ragged and painful, and there’s even a dark scar along his palm.

Quick as anything, he slices the blade of the sword along his arm, next to one of the deeper scars. The cut he opens is almost exactly the same as that one, actually.

Blood begins to drip from the wound, a disturbing black shade, shimmering like gold in the lantern light.

Niki inhales *sharply* in alarm. Techno goes tense next to him. Ghostbur's white eyes grow wider and his hands instinctively go to the wound on his chest.

Tommy draws his wings around himself and holds Techno's hand tighter, trembling all over.

In smooth, practiced movements, Phil spreads his own blood on the sword, painting the diamond that sickly black.

The first drop of blood splatters on the symbol, and they flare with light.

-

Phil knows what resurrections *feel* like. He's performed four of them, he's used countless totems, he knows what the sensation of something being *taken* from you is like.

But it somehow doesn't brace him for how it *feels* when he stabs the sword through Wilbur's chest, for the second time in a few months. The light flares, his chest seizes with an aching pain, and...

It's hard to put into words, the disturbing, morbidly *warm* feeling of your soul being split and ripped from your body.

He can taste it, immediately. Blood, filling his mouth, his throat. He forces himself to swallow it down, forces himself not to choke on it and the memories and more.

Everything seems to fade away. It's just him and the ghost of his eldest son, locked in a morbid mirror of his final moments. There's a high whining in his ears and it makes his head throb.

Phil tries to take a deep breath, but his mouth is too full of blood. It drips out of his mouth, dripping down his chin and soaking into his shirt. He's not even sure where it's coming from, it's just coming up over and over again.

He withdraws the sword. He can hear Niki's soft voice speaking, the words of the spell nonsensical under the whining.

There's black and blue blood on his hands, on the sword. Wilbur has his hands on his chest, touching around the wound, but his blood is still that *terrifying* cerulean, when that's--

--that's not how it's supposed to *work*. If he did it right.

He did it *right*. He followed every step, with as clear of a head as he could.

He did it right this time.

He coughs, and the blood bubbles up just a little too much. He begins to choke, and the whining gets louder, and louder, and louder, until it's almost a wordless wail of some kind, a sound that is most definitely a warning.

His knees meet the wooden floor. His fingers, wet with blood, smear one of the sigils. The light, it's too bright, he's having a hard time seeing anything. The sigils, the symbols, the characters he lovingly painted on the floor, are burned into his vision.

His ring is *bloody* . It somehow fell out of its place underneath his shirt and there's blood smeared on it.

He's still coughing, choking. The taste of his own blood doesn't even make him gag. He's bent in half on his knees, forehead pressed against the floor, his hand wrapped around his ring as he chokes.

I did it right.

I did it right.

I did it right.

He had to have done it right, this time. He did *everything* right.

His vision is blurring, either from tears or the bright lights. Everyone is speaking, but not a word is intelligible over the *wailing* .

(The corruption spread quickly.

It started as a blackened wound on Kristen's arm, the edges of the flesh purplish and inflamed.

By the end of the month, she wouldn't let Phil look at her.

"I can't help you if you don't let me get close," he said helplessly, watching out of the corner of his eye as she folded herself into the small space at the bottom of the guest room closet. "I won't look you in the eyes, I promise. I read something that might help--"

"It can't be helped!" She wailed, voice distorted, wrapping her arms around her head. Her wings, once a gleaming white-silver, were streaked with blackness. One of her eyes had gone purple by then. "I'm going to die like this!"

"No you won't," he promised, kneeling in front of the closet, staring at the floor. "I swear, you won't die, I can help--"

She curled up tighter, if possible, whining, inhuman and wrong. Her arms were entirely blackened, patches of light freckles showing up as it progressed. "It *hurts* ," she whimpered. "I want it to stop *hurting* ."

Nothing they tried helped.

He had to kill her after three months.

It was a mercy for both of them.)

He can't see, his vision is completely blurred and filled with disturbing light. He's aware his wings are moving, instinctive flaps and twitches. Like he's trying to run away, *like he always is*.

He can still hear the wailing.

-

Techno knew it would go bad from the first drop of blood.

It happened... *faster*, than he thought.

From the first flash of light to Phil collapsing, coughing up blood, was less than six minutes.

At the sight of all the blood, Tommy seems to have shut down a little bit. He drew his hand away and curled up, arms around his knees and his eyes stuck wide in horror.

Ghostbur seems too shocked to move, resting a hand over his wounded chest, staring at the wall with even more deadened eyes than usual.

Niki draws in a shaky breath. Her fingers are white-knuckled around the cover of the ritual book, and tears carve down her cheeks.

Techno feels a little weird, being the only one who isn't breaking down. Part of him feels like he *should* be breaking down, there's even that bite of terror-panic-anguish at Phil's fallen, bleeding form, but there's an strange, serene feeling settling over him, for some reason.

He has to take care of everyone, as always. He's good at it, too. Even with the horror, even with his anxiety making his stomach twist and his hands tremble, he's good at it.

Carefully, he stands up from the couch. He grabs a blanket and wraps it tightly around Tommy, gently turning his face away from the bloody scene. He goes without complaint, unfreezing a little to draw the blanket over his face and curl up against the back of the couch.

He steps over to Niki, and pulls her hands from around the book. The thin leather has left small imprints on her palms.

He sets it aside, and holds her hands tightly. "Niki," he prompts softly.

Her eyes snap away from Phil and turn up to him, bright blue and glossy with tears. A lock of her hair, shining almost gold in the lanternlight and the shimmer of the sigils, falls in front of them, free from her loose ponytail.

Techno lets go of one of her hands to brush it away from her face. The motion is oddly natural, and she leans against his hand when it touches her cheek. Her breathing hitches and more tears slide down her face.

She's *nineteen*, he realizes with mild horror. Only two years younger than him, and yet, she seems so small and young as she cries.

Both of them were right. Resurrections are too risky. And the display of raw emotion from everyone is proof.

“I need you to do one thing for me, okay?” Techno asks gently, wiping tears from her cheek with his sleeve. Niki sniffles and nods, still leaning into his hand when he touches her. “I need you to get me healin’ potions, bandages, and a few towels. Can you do that?”

She takes a deep breath, steadier now, and briefly clutches his wrist. They’re both shaking, he realizes. He’s not... completely fine.

“Yeah,” she says, voice small. “Yeah, I can do that.”

She pulls away, wipes her face, and seems to force herself to leave the room to gather supplies.

Techno takes his own steady breath. Helping Ghostbur is kind of out of his depth-- how do you help a ghost who’s obviously dissociating?-- but he’s tended to Phil plenty of times.

He crosses the room to kneel next to him.

He’s stopped coughing, and is instead drawing in deep, rattling, wet breaths, his forehead still pressed to the ground. His hair is soaked with blood where it’s fallen around his face, and his hands are both in fists, one of them at his chest and the other against the floor.

He rests a hand on his shoulder. He’s shaking violently with every breath.

“Phil?” he calls experimentally.

Immediately, Phil jolts up from his hunched position quick enough that Techno jerks back, hand flying away from him.

His face is streaked with tears and blood runs down his chin. He’s clutching that ring he wears, the one on the chain around his neck.

“It didn’t work,” he says, and where he expected hysteria, there’s only an accepting sadness, a helplessness. “It didn’t *work* .”

Techno shakes his head, his heart racing from the startle and the anxiety that’s only climbing at his odd mood. “No. But that’s not important right now, we need to get you cleaned up.” He holds a hand out, keeping his distance just a little. (Call him paranoid, but he’s seen people and animals both lash out when hurt and scared.)

Phil runs a hand into his hair, smearing the blood in the blonde strands. It stands out starkly. Fresh tears pour down his cheeks.

He’s suddenly aware that he’s crying, too. Silent tears, but he can feel them on his eyelashes and running almost perfectly along the scars under his eyes. He’s shaking.

The serene feeling he felt for long enough to briefly comfort the younger members of his pack-- family is disappearing.

He's never seen Phil look so defeated and it's *wrong* .

"I'll..." he starts, before trailing off. There's blood on his teeth. It's everywhere, really. "I'll handle it... j-just help me up. I need... space."

Techno doesn't dare argue. He obediently helps him to his feet, not commenting when his legs tremble and he almost loses his balance so badly his wings snap out to balance him. He just guides him away to the bathroom, where Niki is still gathering supplies.

She looks up when they approach. She's pulled her hair up more securely, and she's not crying anymore. "I've almost got everything," she says in a small voice. "I keep... dropping things. I'm sorry."

"No, it's alright, Niki." Phil's voice has that haunted quality again, like when he was talking about Wilbur's death or the few times Techno has gotten him to talk about his life outside of adventuring, before he adopted all three of them. "I'll take care of it. Thank you, for trying to help."

He's steadier, now, so Techno bites his tongue and lets him step away from him.

Niki gets up from where she was kneeling on the floor, a healing potion and two towels cradled in her arms. "Are you sure?" she asks, her eyes on the wound on his arm, still dripping black. (There's going to be so much blood to scrub out of the floor.) "You're hurt, a-and when you were coughing..."

Phil gives her a small smile, which looks macabre with his bloodied face and clothes. "I'm sure. I'll get it taken care of. I've... done this before."

She looks like she wants to argue, but she swallows whatever it is and nods, handing him the supplies in her arms. "Okay..."

Techno guides her out, and lets Phil close himself in the bathroom.

She sniffles. "That was... a *lot* w-worse than I expected."

He squeezes her shoulder. Her wings twitch and ruffle against her back. "Yeah," he mumbles. "Yeah, it was bad."

Ghostbur is still standing completely still in the middle of the room, but his eyes are now on the floor.

Techno goes to get rags and soap for the floor.

"...it didn't hurt," the ghost says softly, voice barely audible. "He stabbed me and it didn't hurt. It's... it's supposed to hurt." He draws in a breath, completely steady and completely useless. "It didn't work. I'm still dead."

He digs around in one of the chests. "Yeah." His own voice is flat. He sounds like his old self already. "Told you it wouldn't work."

“It was *supposed* to work,” he says stubbornly.

Niki sits at the table and buries her face in her arms.

Tommy gets up from the couch jerkily, dropping his blanket onto the cushion, and joins Techno in his search for cleaner.

“Can I help you?” he asks, a little sharp and uneven. “I need to do something or I’m going to start screaming.”

The matter-of-fact way he says it makes him huff, lightly amused despite the situation.

“Yeah, sure. It’ll take more than one person to clean up all that blood.”

Outside, the full moon shines down.

-

A perfect night for a failed resurrection.

Chapter End Notes

does a funky little dance

fine, great

Chapter Notes

mmmMMM hi hello!!! fun news from dove life: i got diagnosed with adhd. big pog. i also changed my name to dove. also big pog.

anyway!!! this is an in-between chapter. with some Feelings. some Fun and Cool bad implications. processing that failed resurrection. whatever.

i'm trying not to hold myself to high word counts, so i hope you're not disappointed! Big Things are happening soon so this is just a littol interim chapter.

warning for past abuse and the dark themes of the resurrection plot.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The house is so quiet.

Techno can't sleep.

How could he *sleep* after that?

He turns on his side, fingers curling around Marnie's plush arm and thumb rubbing at her worn fur, the soft fleece serving as her hoof.

He got her from Wilbur, years ago.

(He was woken up from a midday nap by his older brother turning on all the lights, in order to start rummaging through their closet and the drawers of his dresser, not at all quietly.

"What're you doin'?" Techno asked, annoyed to be roused, glaring through narrowed eyes at him. "Turn the lights off..."

"No, I'm busy," Wilbur argued, sitting in front of his dresser and pulling things out of the bottom drawer. "I'm getting rid of stuff."

"Do it at a better time," he mumbled, tugging his blankets up around his head and turning to face the wall. "I'm sleepy."

"I need to get rid of my toys." His tone was absolute and bitter. "I'm thirteen. I'm too big for toys."

Techno rolled over again, brows furrowed as he peeked out to see him putting toys into a nondescript bag. "That's dumb. Why do you need to get rid of your toys now?" He couldn't

fathom such a thing; he's just turned ten, but he wouldn't get rid of his few toys even if *forced*. "Toys are fun."

"I'm too old to have a bunch of kids toys," Wilbur explained, getting up from the floor and walking to his bed, picking up his stuffed animals. The dragon, the lion, and the bluebird all went into the bag without hesitation.

He was about to stuff the pig in too. It was bigger than the others, and newer; he had gotten it on one of their last trips into the nearest town.

He sat up from his mess of blankets and huffed. "Can I have that one?"

He looked up in surprise, wings twitching out briefly. "What?"

He gestured at the plush pig. "Can I have it?"

He looked at the toy, and then back up at him, a strange soft expression on his face. "Sure," he said, and tossed the plush his way. He quickly caught it before it could hit the floor. "I knew you'd like something like that."

He stuck his tongue out at him, bringing it into his arms and hugging it. He had a few stuffed animals himself; a pink fish and a calico cat with almost realistic fur. But he had never seen a plush pig, and he didn't go to the small toy store on their last trip.

He pressed his face into the plush's soft head, and giggled quietly.)

Techno rolls onto his back, holding onto Marnie, and stares up at the ceiling. He can't actually *see* it very well-- it's high enough that his nearsightedness renders the beams fuzzy and indistinct.

He and Tommy scrubbed the floor until both of them were sore and on the verge of tears again.

They threw away most of the rags they used. Once it's past a certain level of bloody, it's a lost cause.

When they sat down at the table, Niki had made tea and set cups out for them. Ghostbur was nowhere to be seen, while Ranboo had emerged from his room and was at the table as well, curled up in a chair with his legs crossed.

"Thank you," Tommy said, and Techno nodded his agreement.

They sat in silence for a little while, the only sounds being their cups clinking and soft sips of their drinks.

"...why is dad's blood black?" Tommy asked in a whisper. "That's not... that's not how it's supposed to be. He's-- he's supposed to have red blood, he's mostly *human*."

Techno's foot began to tap.

“I was wondering that too,” Niki murmured. “I’ve never seen anything like that...”

“Demons have black blood,” Ranboo added. “But Phil’s not a demon. I’d *know* if he was a demon.”

Techno snorted. “Me too, kid. He’s not a demon. He’s just made...” he trailed off for a moment. “Bad choices. Too many totems of undying. Too much magic. His... soul, it’s damaged enough that it’s affecting him physically.” He took a sip of his tea. “Or at least, that’s what he told me. He didn’t always bleed black, either. When I was little...”

(The first time he saw Phil hurt, Techno was still fairly weak from withering, and was restricted to staying inside the house.

He was eating breakfast when he came in, his arm bleeding profusely around his fingers, staining both his clothes and his skin red.

He stared for a moment, wide eyed and scared, before flying into a panic and trying to help him clean the wound.

He really just ended up bouncing around him and making worried noises for half an hour, but it didn’t seem to bother him too much.)

His foot was still tapping, his leg bouncing just a little. He was too nauseous from anxiety to even drink any more of the tea.

“He’s going to want to try it again,” Tommy predicted, stirring his tea listlessly. “I just know it. I don’t want to see that again...”

They all sat with that grim prophecy and their tea, until they all separated to get ready for bed.

Techno sat on the couch with a book, not paying attention to the words as he flipped the pages.

After a while, Niki came over to sit next to him, hesitating at his side for a moment. He knows that hesitation-- he sees it in the kids all the time.

Clearing his throat, he raised an arm and gestured for her to come closer. “C’mere.”

She gave him a grateful smile and shuffled in closer, letting him wrap an arm around her and wrapping her own around his middle.

She made no attempt to talk, to process what the evening put in their minds. Instead, she read with him, bright eyes scanning the pages.

She fell asleep on the couch, curled against his side, holding onto him like a teddy bear. He was completely fine with it-- he just covered her with blankets and carefully placed her head on a pillow after he got up.

Techno sits up on the edge of his bed and rubs his face with both hands.

He can still hear Phil pacing around downstairs, quiet footsteps really only perceptible due to how strong his hearing is.

The failed resurrection was terrifying. He saw one before-- what feels like a million years ago, he stumbled upon a group of people trying to resurrect one of their fallen.

There had been so much blood. Both times, just blood all over the place. The voices liked it, at least.

Well, not *this* time.

They had begun to panic as badly as he had when Phil collapsed-- he has a suspicion they've been influenced by his desires and feelings in the last eight years, because they should have delighted in the blood-- and he can still hear them murmuring in worry.

*So much blood
Scared for him
Dadza!!
Go help him!!
Drag him to bed
Take care of him
It's your duty*

He falls back into bed, pulling his blankets up. "He said he doesn't want help," he tells them.

He doesn't *disagree* with them, but he knows pushing on the issue will just make Phil retreat even more than he already is.

He's aware of the irony about that, thank you. He learned it from somewhere.

-

Phil paces the living room as quietly as he can, mindful of the kids sleeping a room away, Niki's slumbering form on the couch.

He has no idea what he did wrong. The odds were entirely on their side. He had been so careful, had kept his head clear even when he was scared, had done everything exactly as the book said.

And yet, it didn't work. Wilbur is still a ghost, still dead. He's curled up on the armchair with his face hidden behind his hair, his wings folded neatly around his body.

He stands near the chair and reaches down to pet his hair. In his sleep, he leans into it, snoring quietly.

(For the first three months, Wilbur didn't let him touch him. He was fine with it-- he had dealt with Techno's touch aversion for much longer than that, and he wasn't going to push it.

It turned out, though, that he craved touch. He was just... also scared of it.

“Goodnight,” Phil said, leaning down to kiss the top of Techno’s head. “Go to sleep pretty soon, okay? We’re heading into town tomorrow.”

“Mhm,” he agreed, eyes not leaving the pages of the novel he was going through. Behind his glasses, his golden eyes looked particularly luminous. “Go to sleep later...”

He chuckled and ruffled his hair, before turning to Wilbur, who was getting comfortable in his nest, fidgeting with the blankets and pillows and stuffed animals.

““Night,” Phil said quietly, smiling at him, but making no attempt at affection.

Wilbur peeked up from where he was adjusting the blankets. His brow was furrowed with consideration for a moment. “Goodnight,” he said, pulling at a pillow.

There was a moment of silence, with only the windchimes outside making any noise.

“Um.” Wilbur cleared his throat. “Can I have a hug?”

He tried not to let his shock show too much. “Sure,” he said, sitting down on the edge of his bed and opening his arms.

Hesitantly, he shuffled closer and wrapped his arms around him. He didn’t comment on how he flinched when he returned the embrace.)

He needs to do it right this time. They’re going to have to try again.

His wound itches under the bandages.

He cards a hand through his own hair, still slightly damp from his shower. He feels vaguely light headed from blood loss, but it isn’t too bad.

It was worse before. So, so much worse.

(He fainted after burying her.)

Next time, he’s going to do it right. He has to.

He walks quietly to the side table next to the couch.

Niki lets out a sigh in her sleep and stretches on the couch, wings batting and arms pressing against the cushions.

(He didn’t expect to get so attached to her, or to Ranboo, for that matter. It’s... something new.)

Phil grabs the book off the table, curling his hand around the thin leather.

He pats Niki’s head, and she sighs again.

He walks quietly to the kitchen table, and sits down. He flips open the book.

Only a month ago, he did this for the first time in years. Read this very book by moonlight, unable to believe he was doing this again.

He flips through the book. There has to be something he did wrong. Something he can *fix* . He can't just accept another failure, another loved one who is a lost cause. He *can't* .

He reaches over his shoulder, ruffling the soft feathers at the base of his wing and picking at a broken one. He picked up that habit years ago. Usually, he tries to stop himself.

He's been doing it a lot more lately.

He keeps turning pages, inspecting every instruction.

He had every tool they needed. The paint, the blood, a willing spirit, the weapon that ended Wilbur's life.

He pulls the broken feather out and flicks it away.

So it has to be *him* . Something about him is stopping the resurrection from working.

But what?

Was it all the failed attempts before? The years he spent in the End? Something else entirely?

He doesn't know, and that *stings* .

He keeps picking at his wings and turning the pages of the book until the sun is beginning to rise.

-

Tommy stares at the ceiling, hands folded on top of his stomach, his mind buzzing with thoughts.

Niki and Techno were right. Resurrections are too dangerous. He doesn't think Wilbur is even *worth* that much blood.

"Sooo," Ranboo starts. When Tommy looks over, he gives a weak smile. He's sitting on the edge of his bed, legs crossed, fiddling with one of the necklaces Techno gave him. "That was... pretty terrible."

He sighs, feeling himself sink into the mattress. The position hurts his wings, but he doesn't even care. "Yeah. Did you... hear it?"

"Mhm." The chain makes a small, light clinking noise as he fidgets with it, curling it over his fingers. "I heard all of it. I tried to ignore it, but... I have good hearing."

He laughs a little, inappropriately. It dissolves into a sad chirp. "I... I get why Phil wants to do this. I even get why Ghostbur *wants* this. But... fuck." He covers his face with his arms. "Wilbur isn't *worth* this."

“You haven’t told me a lot about him, but from what I’ve heard...” Ranboo trails off, letting out an irritated vwoop. “He sounds like he... was kinda hard to deal with.”

Tommy huffs another laugh. “That’s... an understatement.” He presses his face against his arms. “I know I should want him back. He raised me, he took care of me and Techno for so long, but he just-- he kind of fucked it all up, more than once.”

The first time he realized Wilbur was *not* happy having to raise him, he was eleven. It was a few days after his birthday.

It was just the two of them in the house. Techno was tending to the farm, completely off in his own little world, and Tommy was *bored* .

He went to bother Wilbur, while he was supposedly writing in his room.

(As soon as Phil left for good, and that set in for them, he took over their father’s room.

He hadn’t been able to drag Techno into helping him move things-- he had gotten up from the kitchen table, where they were discussing things, and stormed to his own room.)

He shoved the door open, yelling about something that captured his attention, and that set him off.

“Fucking-- *god* , Tommy, can you leave me alone *for ten minutes* ?!” Wilbur yelled, standing up from his desk. The inkwell on his desk was tipped over and the black ink was sinking into the pages of his songbook. “I was trying to get some writing done, and you ruined *everything* !”

Tommy stumbled back in shock at the shouting. Wilbur *very* rarely raised his voice at him before. “I-I’m sorry,” he said, putting his hands up instinctively. “I was j-just bored, and, and Tech’s busy, so I was going t-t-to ask you to pl--”

“I’m busy,” he grit out, sitting back down at his desk. “Ugh, you made me ruin this book...”

While he started cleaning up the desk, he hovered in the doorway hesitantly. “Okay- okay, I’ll go...” he trailed off. “I’ll go play in m-my room...”

It was a small event, but it’s stuck with him more than some of the worst things.

“Are you going to sleep?” Ranboo asks.

Tommy stares up at the ceiling again, the misery sinking into that horrible, familiar blankness. “I don’t know. I’m tired, but...” *I’m going to have nightmares* .

“Do you want me to lay with you?” He offers, head tilted. “That helps, sometimes.”

He rubs his face. “Yeah, that might help.”

Without another word, Ranboo comes over to his bed, laying out next to him and holding his arms out for a hug.

Tommy doesn't hesitate to turn over and accept the embrace, burying his face in his shoulder.

His arms wrap around him, careful not to trap his wings. His tail comes up to drape around his waist.

It feels... safe. This whole house feels safe, really, but... he feels safest when he's being held.

There's probably some kind of reason behind that, but he's too tired to psychoanalyze himself right now.

"Do you want to talk about it?" Ranboo asks, running a hand through his hair.

Tommy sighs, wanting to bury himself even closer to his brother's odd heartbeat and safe warmth. "Kinda."

"I'll listen, if you want to talk." He twirls a piece of his hair between his fingers.

He draws in a deep breath, holds it for a moment, and then exhales slowly. "So, uh. When I was ten or so, Phil... left us." Bitterness coats his voice despite his best attempts to shove it down. "And-- well, Wilbur had just turned seventeen, but he kind of had to step up and take care of me and Techno, y'know?"

He receives an agreeing noise.

"He didn't really want to, I don't think. He was planning to move out and start travelling and stuff. But he took on the responsibility, and... things were kind of okay, for a bit."

He's never really talked about this with anyone.

(He talked about it with Tubbo, but that was... different. Tubbo was *there*, for most of it. They didn't have to put it into words, because they saw it happen.)

"He started getting stressed. And he never really... handled stress well..." Tommy trails off.

The first time Wilbur physically lashed out at either of them, it had been one late evening, just before bedtime.

Tommy was just about to turn twelve; he remembers it well, because he was drawing decorations in a sketchbook. He planned to show them to Tubbo when he saw him later that week.

Techno was out late. That wasn't too odd; he always found some way to entertain himself, keeping himself mostly out of the house. They never said as much, but the two of them realized that Wilbur was getting stressed and it made them both uncomfortable.

That stress was only heightened by him being gone until nearly eleven at night.

When he came through the door, his hair down and his crown crooked, a flush on his cheeks along with a fresh bruise on his jaw, Wilbur was quick to descend on him.

“Why the hell are you home so late?” He asked, tension and an edge of rage in his voice.

Techno, with bright eyes and a brighter grin, said “I got invited to a *party* , after the tournament-- I won, obviously-- and I lost track of--”

Tommy was only listening until then, but the sharp sound of skin-on-skin made him whip around from his drawing, alarmed.

The sight he saw didn't quite seem right-- Wilbur, standing straight and tall at his full height, mouth snarling, and Techno, slumped against the closed front door, one hand on his face, the other clutching the fur shoulder of his cape.

“What happened?” Tommy asked, a little panicky.

Techno blinked a few times, eyes darting up at Wilbur and then over at Tommy. His expression was unreadable. “...you *hit* me,” he said, slowly.

Tommy swallows the bitter cry that wants to leave him. “He was stressed and angry and-- I could tell he hated having to take care of us. And it was awful.”

Ranboo pets his hair, pushing the curls back from his forehead. “I'm sorry,” he murmurs. “No wonder it's kind of stressful to watch all of that.”

He digs his fingers into the back of the oversized shirt he's wearing as pajamas, trying to hide even more by curling closer.

They both go quiet.

Neither of them comment on the few tears that he sheds.

-

Ranboo wakes up.

He's laying in Tommy's bed, his arms and long tail draped around his waist.

He extracts himself from the boy's embrace without blinking.

He pulls on his boots. He grabs his cloak from the hook on the back of their door. He pushes the door open enough to peek out.

The flightless bird is asleep. So is the ghost.

He steps out. His steady hands pull the cloak around his shoulders and secure the clasp at his throat.

He hears a sound. His ears twitch up and he turns quickly to find the source.

Philza is at the table, head resting on his arm, asleep.

Ranboo walks quietly through the living room and opens the door without a sound.

He walks over the snow, barely hearing the crunch of the ice under his feet. He keeps his attention focused on a particularly tall spruce tree with thick, fanning branches.

He stops in front of the tree and stares with empty eyes at the bark, greyish and deep in the moonlight.

“There you are,” Dream’s voice says, and he drops down from the tree, brushing debris from his hoodie.

Ranboo continues to stare.

“Well, don’t keep me waiting, doll,” Dream drawls, crossing his arms as he leans back on the thick tree. “How did their little resurrection go?”

He doesn’t think before he speaks. He’s not sure if they’re even his words; they just come from his mouth. “ $\overline{\Phi} \underline{\Xi} \psi \nmid \mathcal{J} \Delta \mathcal{I} \mathcal{L} \mathcal{W} [\mathcal{I}] \mathcal{O} \mathcal{O} \mathcal{H} \neq \mathcal{L} \mathcal{W} \overline{\Phi} \mathcal{W} \mathcal{L} \nmid \mathcal{H} .$ ” His tail flicks back and forth underneath his cloak. He can barely feel the burn of the cold wind on his bare face.

“Really?” He reaches up to scratch at the back of his neck. “Huh. Thought they’d do better than that.”

“ $\neq \mathcal{I} \mathcal{L} \llcorner \Delta \mathcal{O} \mathcal{O} \mathcal{I} \mathcal{L} \mathcal{I} \mathcal{I} \underline{\Xi} \Delta \mathcal{O} \mathcal{W} \mathcal{I} \mathcal{I} \mathcal{W} \mathcal{I} \mathcal{I} , \mathcal{I} \mathcal{I} \mathcal{O} \mathcal{I} \mathcal{A} \mathcal{O} \mathcal{I} \overline{\Phi} . \underline{\Xi} \mathcal{W} \Delta \Delta \mathcal{I} \mathcal{O} \mathcal{O} \mathcal{L} \mathcal{O} \mathcal{I} \mathcal{W} .$ ” He shifts his feet on the snow, his gaze dropping to the ground.

He blinks a few times, unable to process his own speech.

What is he doing? Why is he outside?

“If he’s really an immortal, he might be pushing the boundaries to see how far he gets,” Dream speculates. He can feel his gaze resting on his face, even with his mask on. “I don’t think their attempts will lead to anything big, but if it does... come back here.”

Ranboo nods. His face is so cold.

Dream gives a light laugh. “You can head back inside, little doll. Sleep well.”

He nods again. He’s swaying in place and his head feels heavy.

When he looks up, the masked man is completely gone. Like he disappeared.

...

The sun is rising.

That doesn’t make sense... it was still pitch black outside when he went outside.

Right?

How did he get outside? Why would he be outside?

It's hard to think. His vision is all blurry, which is weird, because-- because his good eye is just that-- *good* .

He turns to walk back to the house.

He was... sleepwalking. He must have been sleepwalking, right? It happens more when he's stressed or when something big happens.

That makes sense.

That makes sense.

Chapter End Notes

big sleepy hours. im gonna take a nap now.

(i'm kidding it's 7:25pm)

i'm such a fool to pay this price

Chapter Notes

resurrection chapter resurrection chapter resurrection chapter!!!

this chapter was..... a bit of a pain in the ass to write. the pacing was hard, i had to fill in some plot holes, but... its finally done!!!

warnings: blood, self-harm (again for ritual reasons), and general dark vibes. it's kind of heavy.

revivebur time..... begins now.

title from coming down by halsey (suggested by my beloved partner in brainrot, deathsquiggles <3)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The days pass.

Phil is well aware that he's obsessing over the ritual book.

He tries to decode the parts of the book he's never been able to get through. That's probably going to be helpful.

Everything he decodes is the same as the rest; more descriptions of the ritual itself, the blood, the tools needed.

Nothing new. Nothing at *all* . The notes in his own handwriting are nothing short of frustrating-- warnings in his pen intertwine with the old, faded text of the book's original owner.

In the back of the book, there's a page written *entirely* in ender. He hasn't had to read that in ages, but he can definitely work it out with some time...

Wait.

--

Ranboo bites the end of his pen, not thinking much about it. He has others, it's fine if he messes this one up.

He's particularly nervous now. There's just enough lingering magic in the house to get him all jittery and uncomfortable, and he's finding it hard to relax and think straight.

Not to mention that everyone in the house is very poorly dealing with the resurrection.

He lied, when he said he didn't see any of it. For some stupid reason, he had peeked out of the bedroom. Too curious for his own good, he supposes.

The blood. The flickering waves of magic. And that horrible *sound*. The wailing...

He doesn't blame them for being uneasy after that. Especially Phil-- god, he can't imagine how he's feeling.

He writes down a few more words. His handwriting is particularly messy today.

Someone knocks on the door, and he peeks up from his book. He's sitting on the floor, next to his bed, curled into a ball in the very small space between the bedframe and the wall. (His enderman instincts tell him to curl up in small spaces. As you do.)

He climbs back into his bed, shaking his head to brace himself for talking with another person.

(It's not just the resurrection that's bothering him.

They're all so *tense* . Techno snapped at him earlier-- he didn't mean to, he apologized, but Ranboo still feels this horrible pit of fear in his belly.

He can feel everyone's anxiety and worry. And that is solidly *not helping* his state.

They're scared. *He's* scared.)

He pulls his legs up and crosses them neatly on the bed, going back to his writing. "You can come in," he says, keeping his voice level.

Phil opens the door and steps in, smiling tiredly. He's holding that book, the one with all the stuff about the resurrection. "Are you busy with anything?" He asks, tone odd.

Ranboo fakes a smile. His tail flicks on the bed behind him. "Not really. Why?"

He holds the book in both hands. "Well... can you read ender?"

A surprised noise leaves him, and he clutches his memory book. "I can," he says, a little too eagerly. He *never* gets a chance to read ender; it's barely used in the overworld. He has a few pages in his book that are written in it, but that's all.

His smile becomes a little less tired, his eyes widening a bit with excitement. "Could you read this for me?" He flips the pages of the book and sits gingerly on the edge of his bed, showing a particular page to him.

He shuffles closer and takes hold of the book to see the words.

Dangerous .

He frowns at the warning that flashes through him. Yeah, it's obviously dangerous. He doesn't need his abilities for that.

Whoever wrote this wasn't an enderman, he can feel that much. There's less targeted, charged feelings in the writing. A human, then. Or at least something human-adjacent. Another hybrid, maybe?

Even then, he can tell the writer was... scared? Or... concerned, maybe. Something like that.

He inspects the characters, mouthing the words to himself. They make sense, sure, and it'll probably be useful, but...

"Are you sure you want to know what this says?" He asks hesitantly.

He doesn't so much as blink. He clasps his hands on his lap, and his folded wings twitch. "Yes."

Ranboo bites into his lip. "Okay then." He takes a breath and begins to read the passage.

" Be wary, reader.

I have obscured the information in this book intentionally. I collected knowledge about this unholy ritual only to keep it away from those who are not truly desperate for options.

If you are at the point in your journey where resurrection is your only choice, I offer you my profound sympathy.

There is one necessary component of the ritual that I did not detail previously, for the reasons stated above.

I warn you once more; this is only for the *most desperate* .

The last tool you require is a totem of undying, ideally one that has been with you through trial and strife.

Place it in the hands of your fallen, and with luck? You will bring them back. "

The silence after his words is tense. He gingerly closes the book. His hands are shaking a little.

Dangerous is an understatement.

"Why didn't I think of a totem...?" Phil murmurs to himself, rubbing the side of his neck. "It makes so much sense..."

Ranboo sets the book down on the bed. He... he wishes he didn't have to read that out.

Resurrections aren't good.

They're dangerous and painful and spill more blood than necessary.

He's never seen one this close-- there's a shattered memory of someone holding him against their chest as that horrible wailing sound surrounded them-- but even then... he felt the darkness of the magic.

Something disgusting and sticky and horribly *corrupting* .

It's scarier than Dream's blank wall of silence and dark aura, scarier than the void-like darkness around Phil, scarier than those fuzzy memories of his childhood.

Phil gets up from the edge of the bed. His smile is gone, but there's a bit of satisfaction in his expression. He grabs the ritual book and holds it against his chest.

"Thank you," he says, voice soft in a way that makes him shiver with uncomfortable happiness..

He replies with a "you're welcome", but he doesn't think much about it.

He's just enabled them to do it again.

Fantastic.

--

They try again, a few days later.

The moon is high, the sky is clear. Fresh snow, untouched, has just finished falling.

Techno cuts the ritual off before it can go too far. He's not sure why, but something is just... wrong, about it. It was *wrong* the first time, but especially so now.

Before Phil can stab the ghost of his eldest son, he stands up abruptly from the couch. "This-- it's not goin' to work tonight," his voice comes out inappropriately high and fearful. He's trembling.

Tommy looks up at him from where he's sitting curled up on the couch, eyes wide. Niki lets out a quiet, relieved sigh. Ghostbur's brows furrow and his head tilts in confusion, as his fingers fidget with the totem he was given.

And Phil stares with deadened eyes at the floor, clutching the bloodied sword, his own blood dripping from the cut on his arm.

The *hum* of the activated sigils, the soft sounds of their breathing, the drip-drip-drip of blood from the wound on Phil's arm-- they fill the air instead of words for a long moment.

"We have to try again," Phil mutters. "It'll work this time. I-I know it will."

"We have the last thing we need!" Ghostbur says, a nervous cheerfulness in his voice. He holds up the totem, its emerald eyes glinting in the fire and lantern light. "It'll work this time, Techno."

Techno can't put words to how he knows this will be bad. The voices are no help in this situation-- their words are an indistinct warble of nonsense. Maybe something to do with the resurrection? Who knows.

"It won't work," he says, and though he tries to sound strong, his voice cracks. He brings his hand up and bites into the side of it, barely thinking. His foot is tapping and his tail won't stay still. There's something like panic and adrenaline running through his veins.

He releases his hand from between his teeth. He doesn't actually feel the small bitemarks on his skin. "I don't know why, but i-it won't work, you're just-- just weakenin' yourself for no reason--"

Phil's gaze is still blank as he stares at the floor. The light of the sigils pulses as his blood drips on them. "Maybe..." he murmurs. "Maybe you're right..."

Niki clears her throat pointedly. "We can always try again tomorrow," she offers. "He's right. Something does feel wrong about tonight."

Ghostbur hums, out of key and cheerful. "That could work..." he glances at his father and frowns. "You really don't look good."

He blinks heavily. Techno can see how sluggish his movements are.

(Too much magic does that to you.)

"Yeah... yeah, we'll try tomorrow." Phil concedes, barely stepping away from the sigils. His arm continues to bleed.

Niki grabs the bandages off the sidetable, and gently pulls him by the arm, bringing him closer. The lights of the sigils flare once more before falling dark.

She quietly wraps the cut after cleaning all the blood.

Techno and Tommy work together to get the living room straightened out.

--

They try again the next night.

The results are similar to the first attempt.

Techno could tear his hair out.

--

The silence between the three of them-- four of them, if you count Wilbur's unconscious form on the floor, loosely tucked under a blanket, a small puddle of blood and saliva near his face-- feels thicker than honey with none of the sweetness.

Tommy picks at the dried blood under his nails. It's blue, brilliantly so, and he wonders when he just started accepting that his older brother's ghost bleeds a bright cobalt.

(He wonders when he just accepted that his older brother is a fucking *ghost* .)

"It should have worked this time. You did everything right, you used the totem," Techno mutters, "why didn't it *work* ?"

"I don't *know*," Phil's reply is tired, tired in that way that makes the back of Tommy's neck prickle because it sounds *angry*, like they're bothering him just by *being there* .

He's not-- even in bad times he wasn't *like that* , but Tommy is a traumatized mess and maybe that's for the best because it's made his instincts sharp. He shifts in his chair and turns his eyes to the floor, to the ghost sleeping there.

"...you should let me try." He can hear Techno's foot tapping restlessly, the thick sole of his boot against the wooden floor. When he glances back slightly, he can see how wide and honest his eyes are, filled with determination yet fear.

("I morally object to necromancy," he had muttered when they started discussing this. When Ghostbur-- Wilbur, they've been using his name again even though it makes Tommy want to *scream* -- said he'd like to be resurrected. "Dead things should *stay dead* ."

"Well, you do a lot of things you morally object to, mate." Phil reminded him, disapproving, and Techno's laugh was sharp and unkind and-- well, it wasn't a fun laugh.)

The tension grows thicker when Phil lets out a warning sound, something between a growl and a chirp. Instinct makes Tommy's feathers raise and his fingers go for the knife on his belt, wrapping loosely around the handle.

"If you try, it will *kill you* ." His words are sure, forceful, and god he hates how Techno flinches as if struck, how his ears fold down like a scared animal, how his eyes widen ever further. "Besides, your... your experiences with magic... are different, a *lot* different, than mine. It wouldn't be pretty."

There's something *unsaid* , something *implied* , and Tommy rubs his thumb along the handle of his knife.

Because even after all of this, *all* of this, his still-building recovery and their renewing trust and the execution and adding extra people to their family-- there's still more trust between the two of them. Understanding, as well.

(He doesn't resent them for it, not anymore. He doesn't resent Technoblade for getting more of their father's attention.

Because, if you look, if you scratch at the surface even a little, he's the one out of the three of them who's *most obviously* Philza's son.

It's something woven into their beings, their bones and muscles and skin and soul. How they revel in the violence and cruelty that Tommy and Wilbur would cringe from, how they share

feral smiles during fights, in the spreading of giant wings and the excited flick of a long tail.

Even down to something as simple as how they take their coffee, they *reflect* each other. A mirror, a large piece of ice, the blade of a sword.)

"I don't really care if it's risky," and the soft honesty in Techno's voice is something new, something that only came after the execution and Ranboo and Niki moving in. "It's not working with you, obviously. So I'll do it."

"Technoblade, if you try to resurrect your brother, *it will kill you*."

Both of them flinch. Tommy's stomach jolts and he clutches his knife tighter, and Techno's ears flick up, and then fold down again, his eyes widening further.

Phil runs his hand through his hair, sparkling gold in the morning sun through the window behind him. He reaches the other out to grasp Techno's wrist, pressing his thumb into the skin, and Tommy doesn't know why he goes tense like that, but his eyes narrow and the softness around his mouth disappears. He looks... weak, childlike, yet angry.

"It will *kill you*, Techno," he says, and it isn't that painful sharpness, but equally painful helplessness. "Trust me, I don't-- I would let you, if it wasn't such a sure thing. You can't... in your situation, trying to resurrect someone *wouldn't work*."

"Right," Techno's voice doesn't tremble, but there's a note of soft, *childish* hesitation in it that's almost scarier. Tommy stares at the floor between his boots, at the well-sewn fabric of his pants, at the faint bloodstain that *just* discolors the wood. "Because I'm meant to do the opposite, I'm meant to *kill*, not..."

He's sure he's missing some context here, some explanation as to why exactly necromancy would surely kill The Blade. But he doesn't think he wants to know.

He's a mute observer, he has been the entire time. He doesn't have to be, but he knows the reaction he'll receive, if he suggests it.

He says it regardless.

"I could do it."

The tension *snaps* and Phil stands up, wings flaring out, and it takes just about everything Tommy has not to fall to his knees and start apologizing.

He instead meets his eyes, meets his expression that rests somewhere between horror and pride and anger. He leans back in his chair and crosses his arms, keeps his face firm.

"You're not going to do it," he says, slowly, like he thinks Tommy isn't listening. "You're a child, Tommy, you don't need the burden of this on your mind--"

"It would work, though, wouldn't it?" He presses, and his own foot taps restlessly, yet another thing he picked up from Techno. " *He* can't do it because of... *something*, " *something you're not telling me and probably never will*, "and it's not working with *you* because there's

something wrong with your blood." That's not really the reason, Tommy is sure of that, but he knows it's related.

(Their first time has settled in his mind as a fresh, new nightmare.

There was so much blood, only in inhuman tones-- Wilbur's bright blue and a horrible gold-flecked black from Phil's choking coughs.

Tommy scrubbed the floor until his hands were raw.)

"I've never done something like this," he continues, and the words hurt a little coming out, but *god* this is the only thing he has left to offer. He needs to help somehow, he needs to help with this damned resurrection. "There's something about fresh blood, right? A virgin sacrifice?" The joke that the old Tommy would make does not come to his tongue, and that's something that makes his stomach twist. "Let me try it."

"No." Phil slumps back into his chair.

Suddenly, he looks very young. His bright eyes are widened, his mouth is parted and slack with a split through his lower lip, and his hair is loose and wavy around his face. The circles under his eyes are a shade too dark from the black of his blood, and Tommy feels sick to his stomach. In the rising sunlight, there's a shimmer of gold to his skin.

(*Angel* is a fitting title, but as always, nothing is that simple.)

Techno's tapping foot stops, and he growls in thought. "I mean... he's right," he says carefully. Phil's gaze snaps to him, and his ears flick with annoyance. "You know I'm right. He's pure, at least in terms of magic. He's not cursed, and he didn't... do what you did."

Tommy feels an inexplicable level of love, at him taking his side. He fiddles with his knife, keeping his face neutral.

"If we tried it, it could work..." Techno trails off.

"No, it wouldn't! Purity doesn't help in this case!" God, he has to repress an urge to run and hide at the way he's almost shouting, wings spread out behind him, the rustle of his dark feathers like crackling ice. "It could ruin him, completely break his mind, and we're not taking that risk!"

"I want to!" Tommy's voice rises, startling in its intensity. For a half-second, he sounds like his old self again, the same kid who caused everyone so much trouble, who challenged everyone and anyone. "I don't care if it'll fuck me up. I don't think it can really get worse..." His tongue feels numb. He's suddenly aware his eyes are hot like he's going to cry, and his hands are shaking. "And it's what Wil wants, right? I owe him that, at the very least--"

"You don't owe him shit," Techno mutters, "If you do this--"

"You're not *going* to."

"--it has to be of your own volition. If you do something like this out of guilt..." He can see him press his tongue against his top two teeth, and the action is inappropriately childish. "It's not good for you."

As soon as he began explaining that, Phil bristled and his wings drew back to his body, long feathers curving around his legs. His eyes shine with barely withheld tears.

(There's context there. Context he thinks neither him nor his brother has, or will ever have.

He doesn't think he wants it, because it makes Phil look terrified and small again.)

"Then I'm doing it *voluntarily*," Tommy says, and oh, it's not like he doesn't know this will be a mistake, he read the books too, but he's going with it. "We'll only try with me once. If it doesn't work, fine. But we're running out of options."

"We still have options," Phil says, leaning back in his chair, staring at the ceiling. "We have resources we haven't exhausted yet. I don't want to call them all yet, but they're definitely coming before you."

Tommy is surprised by how sharp his voice comes out. "Either you let me try it and keep me safe while I do it, or I'll do it behind your back."

He usually doesn't have the mettle to stand up to anyone like this anymore. He's become rather meek, terrified of authority, of retribution for misbehavior. Even now, determined as he is, his healed-and-healing wounds ache like the days they were inflicted, remembering the agony.

When Phil meets his eyes, he's very aware of how similar they are to his own.

If they were a bit more blue, they would be so similar that you could mistake their blonde-framed, pale faces for each others. And that's something, too, one of those somethings that Tommy isn't smart enough to dig into.

After a long moment, he sighs and sinks back in his seat. Darkness overtakes his expression. "Tonight," he concedes. "At midnight. We'll try it. But the minute it seems like it's going poorly, we're abandoning it. Wilbur will understand."

That's as good as he's getting.

"Alright," he nods, serious, like this is a deal *either* of them wants to make.

"We should get to bed," Techno says, standing up. There's a sick look to his features, and Tommy knows he's going to cry when he's upstairs and away from his own prying eyes. Just like he knows Phil won't sleep a moment, too busy thinking, fingers fiddling with the silver ring on his necklace.

(He knows, vaguely, why he keeps that ring. It's a wedding ring, from a long-lost since lost.

He knows he used to leave the house, on some late nights, with a candle or lantern, some late nights, and walk out into the forest, only returning once the sun was rising.

There's something there, too, but it's not a lack of knowledge that keeps Tommy from prying this time-- it's *respect*.

Because they've all lost someone they've loved.)

He rises as well, yawning, and gently nudges Wilbur's shoulder with his shoe. His quiet snoring pauses, and one white eye cracks open. "Are you comfortable on the floor?"

"Mmyeah," he mumbles, barely awake, "m'comfy, Toms."

He shrugs-- he's not about to move him-- and goes to get ready for bed.

After he washes his face and gets into pajamas, he walks to his room and closes the door securely behind him.

He lets out a heavy breath and sinks into his bed.

Ranboo lets out a vwoop and rolls over in bed. He opens his eyes and peers through the darkness at him. "Hi," he mumbles. "You're going to bed now?"

Tommy nods, rubbing his eyes. "Yeah. We're... we're trying again tomorrow."

He growls quietly. "M'kay. Sounds good." He shifts, and he can see the glint of his plush enderman's eyes as he hugs it closer. "Night."

"Goodnight," he replies, laying out and staring at the dark ceiling.

He doesn't want to do this again. They've already done it two times, and it didn't work.

But this... this might be different. He wants to help, finally, he wants to do something more than just observe in horror.

(And there might be an element of self-destruction, to it.

He's not going to lie and say he thinks it'll absolutely work this time. He's not going to lie and say he doesn't feel like punishing himself for being so useless during this.)

--

It's eleven fifty-five.

The painted shapes on the floor are stark against the wood, glimmering lightly.

Techno refuses to participate in this part-- "I'll just jinx it"-- and instead sits off to the side, observing, ever-curious.

"You've seen how this goes," Phil's voice is shaky, and Tommy has to work to not let it affect him. "It might not play out exactly the same-- I don't know how it'll react with fresh blood-- but it should follow the same rules." He swallows audibly, like he's going to cry.

And oh.

Oh, it would be easier to give in. He *knows* it would. There's a scared, small part of him, permanently five and terrified, that would love to give this up and instead cling to his father, crying into his warm embrace.

But that would mean giving up, and god, Tommy isn't good at giving up. He's never felt comfortable with it.

"Okay," he replies, his voice odd and flat.

"I think it'll work this time!" Wilbur says cheerfully, his voice whispery and obviously hopeful. "Don't worry about it."

Oh, he's definitely worrying.

It's always so deceptively simple, the ritual. Wilbur is given a totem of undying-- their second-to-last one, Techno is planning to hunt around for another woodland mansion as soon as they have time and he feels well enough-- and stood in the middle of the largest symbol.

Tommy cuts into his arm with the sharp edge of the sword. It doesn't really hurt; he's done it enough times even without supernatural reasoning. He uses his fingers to carefully wipe the blood along the blade of the sword. The bright blue, shining surface briefly reflects his face.

He swallows the sick feeling that comes from seeing his own blood on a weapon.

Ranboo is out of their room tonight-- he usually stays in their room, avoiding the magic and the bloodshed. It gives him a headache and he doesn't like blood. But he's out tonight, sitting crosslegged next to Techno's chair, an abandoned book open on the floor. His eyes are all glowy, and his ears are perked up at attention. He looks as alert as he's ever seen him.

(After the first attempt, he hadn't hesitated to hold Tommy, to offer comfort. The sentiment made him feel a little bit choked; Ranboo is the only one there who has no connection to Wilbur, and yet, he's been so kind about the situation.)

Niki is sitting on the arm of Techno's chair, her eyes alert, her wings poised as if she'll take flight when startled. She's been vocal with her disbelief and distrust in the ritual, but she's been present to help clean everything up every time.

(He's always thought she was strong and remarkably good at keeping her cool, but-- but with their last attempt, that was really proven.

She hadn't flinched at all when she had to pull Phil out of the circle of sigils, causing the light to shut off and the odd humming of the magic to cease.

She wordlessly cleaned the third deep, bloody cut on his arm, before sending him off to bed.

It was kind of funny that it worked.)

Blood drips onto the floor, sinking into the floorboards and the sigils, and they brighten, giving off faint, yellowish light. It's much mellow than every other time they've tried this, and it's warm against Tommy's legs.

He lets blood drip off his arm for a moment, but he can't delay too long. Dried blood doesn't work, not for the sacrifice.

It's not really a sacrifice. More like... a *trade*.

(Maybe that's why it hadn't worked with Phil. Because really, who out of them can be sure he's still *mortal*?)

He has to work up some courage, to be able to stab through his ghostly older brother's torso. He hesitates, holding the sword securely, just as he was taught.

"It's okay," Wilbur comforts gently. The blue stain down the front of his sweater is like a morbid target. "It doesn't really hurt very much, and if it works, I'll be alive again! Don't worry about me, just do it."

Tommy swallows.

And then he just.

Does it.

He's stabbed people before. He's been in fights before.

But this is-- this feels wrong. The blood-slick blade easily goes through him, as if it's a key fitting into a lock, and as soon as it slides to its hilt in his chest, Tommy feels like something is *taken* from him.

He's not sure what, really. Something immaterial yet painfully *physical*. A sharp shock of pain goes through his own chest, as if he was the one stabbed, and his next breath is clotted with blood.

Wilbur gasps, the sound dry despite the fact that the sword must have pierced a lung, and goes worryingly stiff. The light is brighter now, and there's a buzzing in his ears, like angry insects.

Someone is speaking-- he thinks it might be Phil? There are words needed for this ritual, he forgot that part-- but it just fades into the buzzing. He's frozen, holding the blade in Wilbur's chest, keeping both of them from collapsing somehow.

He feels empty, like this is taking from him with every second. The closest comparison he can summon is how he felt-- how he felt when Dream threatened to cut his wings off, and he tried to imagine his life without them. This hollow, longing pain.

His arms twitch, the blade shifting, and Wilbur curses, all too human and solid and real.

Something like electricity crackles underneath his skin, starting at his own chest, tingling out towards the rest of his body, raising his hair and feathers. His wings stretch out, all instinct, and spread behind him.

It hurts. It aches.

It almost feels *good* .

"You have to remove the sword now."

His head feels like it's full of cotton, but he can hear Phil's voice so clearly-- it's something he can cling to, something real.

He withdraws the blade from Wilbur's chest. It makes a wet sound and it makes him jolt, so tense he can't move any more than that.

He can't see all that well. There's a fuzz of white light and black spots in his vision, even though logically he knows that he's in the mostly-empty living area with his family around him and Wilbur in front of him and a bloody sword in his hands.

He can see the sword.

The blood is all red. Not *blue*.

Not blue?

Did it work?

Did it work?

DID IT WORK?

He's breathing unevenly, and his mouth tastes like iron. (Swords and hair pins and the crown Techno gave him)

He coughs once and something drips past his lips, hot and wet down his chin. (Coughing up salt water, sitting on his knees in the sand, Dream's hand entangled in his hair)

There's a click, a *shattering* sound, and Tommy stumbles back. Someone catches him and he doesn't fall, though it's a near thing. He keeps coughing, and he can only taste metal and can only see blackness now.

Someone is speaking again, but nothing makes sense. It all sounds like gibbering nonsense and something like weeping. He can barely breathe through the blood and he can barely feel his own body.

Hands grip his shoulders and he's guided to the floor, laid on his side. A hand strokes his hair and the electricity crackles down his spine, painful and right and he thinks he might be singing, birdlike and broken through blood-drowned lungs.

He can-- he can hear Wilbur's voice. He's talking, unintelligible but comforting and he wants to climb into his arms like a scared seven-year-old who's been reading too much about monsters.

(He slept in Wilbur's bed for a month after learning about phantoms.)

Blood is dripping from his mouth, pooling around his head on the floor, and the emptiness is eating up his insides, filling him with sponge-like holes and it hurts. He's becoming hollow and he doesn't want to.

"Drink this," something else is poured into his mouth and he chokes on it and the blood. He manages to swallow, though, and the iron-and-magic taste is sickeningly delicious.

"Shhh, shhh..." he's being soothed, as he drinks the potion. He isn't sure what it is, or why he's so willing to take it, they could kill him like this, helpless as a child. Someone is stroking his hair and someone is resting their hand between his wings, gentle and steady.

The blackness is still covering his vision. He's unable to see anything, and it is terrifying.

(is this how Ranboo feels on his bad side?)

"Good, good, Tommy, you're doing really well," he's still not sure who's talking to him, but it's soothing and comforting, and the praise feels good, joining the electric feeling and chasing away some of the hollowness.

The potion is taken away from his mouth, and a cloth wipes the blood from his face.

He can't move, but that's fine. He feels like he's on the edge of unconsciousness, and the blood is hot in his hair, and his wings twitch like the legs of a restless dog.

"Go start him a bath," *(why would I need a bath?)* "He has a fever again. I knew this wasn't a good idea."

He has to argue. He thinks this went well.

The blackness only begins clears when he's undressed and sunk into the warmth of the bathtub. His vision slowly returns, as his face is washed clean with a wet cloth, his hair scrubbed gently with Techno's lavender soap. He's only able to see when the tub is drained and refilled with clean water.

Techno is kneeling next to the bathtub, his hair pulled back, his face pale. There's blood smeared on his clothing.

"...hello," Tommy mumbles, slurs. "Didditwork...?"

His brother snorts in reply, running clawed fingers through his hair, between his wings, sorting out the wet feathers on his back without hesitation. He's not speaking, but he supposes that makes sense.

This must have been terrifying, even from the outside.

"Is Wilbur alive?" He presses, a little bit clearer. "Give me a nod, at least..." he feels fuzzy, like he's drunk (he's only drunk once in his life and he hates thinking about it) and focusing is hard, but he has to know.

He has to know this wasn't in vain.

Techno kisses his damp forehead gently, and nods.

Tommy lets out some distorted, laughter-choked chirping sound. "I did it, then."

He hums in response, nodding again, and begins untangling his hair. He's aware that he's shaking so hard it hurts, and even in the warm water, he's freezing.

Once he's clean-- and warmish-- he's pulled from the tub and dressed again. He feels limp and doll-like, so he doesn't mind when he's carried to his bed, laid under the covers and tucked into place.

Techno pauses at his bedside, petting his damp hair. He leans into it, content chirps leaving him.

He feels so heavy and tired, like he's sick again, though with somehow *less* pain in his chest. He still feels oddly hollow, but something tells him that's going to continue being the case for a while.

He lets his eyes drift closed. He wants to go see Wilbur, hug him, hold him close-- but for now, he can rest and recover. After all, he's alive again, isn't he? And it's not like he's going anywhere.

For a fleeting moment, Tommy lets himself hope that their family is going to truly be together again.

--

The first thing Wilbur is aware of is a disturbing buzzing.

It's so loud, so high. He can feel it shaking him to the bones.

His body is so... heavy. So real.

He's sitting on his knees, on a hard surface. One of his hands is at his chest, feeling wet with - with something, and the other is braced on the floor. He shifts his fingers, and something thick and wet smears on them.

He draws in a breath, filling his lungs for the first time in months, and everything is suddenly painfully clear and bright and *alive* .

He coughs a few times, but-- but that's fine, he's able to breathe, that's fine.

He's kneeling on a wooden floor. The room around him is lit with mellow, warm light, but around him, around his legs and below his hand, there's a painfully bright, yellow-white glow. He's staring at the floor, clutching his chest, trying to make sense of anything.

The buzzing is fading. He can hear voices, people talking. Shadows pass in his field of view. Lifting his head seems impossible, so he just watches the dark shapes move out of the corner of his eye.

He takes his hand from his chest. He blinks a few times to banish a strange, heavy blur from his vision, and he can see that his palm is soaked with blood.

He touches his chest again. His sweater, yellow and soft, is torn open in the middle, but.

But he's not hurt. When he brushes his fingers against his skin, he's not bleeding. There's the rough texture of a scar on his chest underneath his sweater, but he's not bleeding.

Then where did all the blood come from?

He takes another deep breath. He's trembling, he notices. There's a sickeningly metallic taste in his mouth, and wetness dripping down his chin.

He raises his hand to wipe it away, and it's-- something glowy and gold, like the light surrounding him.

What's going on?

Suddenly, he's pulled into a tight embrace, strong arms locked around him. The whole world tilts as he's tugged close to a warm body, and he has to close his eyes against the vertigo.

Fingers pet through his hair, and the voice he hears is suddenly very clear and startling.

"I'm sorry," Phil says softly. He seems to try to hug him even closer.

Wilbur cracks his eyes open a little. He's practically squished against his father's shoulder, so he's definitely *there*.

He's not in that post-death dream. He's--

He's--

He's *alive*?

A wave of emotion slams into him and he chokes on a sudden sob.

He's *alive*.

He gasps through his cries, his arms coming up to grab at Phil's back.

He's-- he's alive. Why is he alive?

He was just dead. He was arrested in constant darkness, he died, exactly like he *wanted*.

But he's alive now, being held by his father, unable to stop crying.

He's alive.

He doesn't know how this happened, but he doesn't think he's going to like it.

Chapter End Notes

i'm going to be taking a break after this chapter!!! i am. moderately sick and also giving myself Big Anxiety about all the plot stuff so pffff it's break time for dove.

you come back, but you come back wrong

Chapter Notes

wilbur pov chapter!!! you guys are going to have a fun time!!!

im back from my break! still feeling big tired but like. im better now. i also have another chapter im working on to post it maybe later today or tomorrow!

warning for blood and references to amputation and death. y'know. normal stuff

title from [a poem by nathaniel orion](#), which is the VIBE for resurrection arc <3

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

It takes a while for Wilbur to stop crying.

He doesn't even know *why* he's crying. There's just a well of emotion inside of him that keeps giving him tears and clutching sadness.

But eventually, he ends up wearing himself out. He's just left hiccuping and aching, his eyes feeling raw and his chest feeling very tight.

Phil held him the whole time, petting back his hair and murmuring soft words that he couldn't understand.

The situation still isn't clear. How is he alive? He died and that's supposed to be the *end* of it.

But he's here again, sitting on the floor in his father's arms, his body heavy and real and alive.

"Let's get you off the floor," Phil says gently. "Can you stand?"

Wilbur swallows thickly, and nods. He's... pretty sure his legs will hold him.

He's carefully guided up onto his feet. His legs shake, but they don't give out.

(Feeling his *body* move after months of simply being a mind floating in a void... it's *odd*.)

He's led to a couch, and gently pushed into sitting down. It's a nice couch, soft but supportive. It's covered in blankets and there's a visible stitch on the cushion he's sitting on.

Where is he?

He looks around. It's... very vaguely familiar. A wooden-walled room with photographs over the fireplace to his left. A bookshelf stuffed with knickknacks and thick books. Coats and weapons hung by the door across from him. Blue curtains over dark windows. Warm light fills the room from multiple lanterns.

A boarlike skull mounted above the mantle.

Technoblade.

This must be Techno's house. The skull is kind of a dead giveaway.

("Where did you even *find* that?" Wilbur asked, staring at the skull in his little brother's hands.

"I have my ways," Techno said calmly, running his fingers over the bleached surface.)

Why would he be in Techno's house?

Techno made it pretty damn clear that he doesn't like him. And... the feelings *might* be mutual.

Where he was sitting, there are strange symbols rendered in white paint, smeared and mixed with blood.

And *feathers* . There are a lot of feathers on the floor, amid the blood. Grey and tan and... *white* .

Cream-white. Long and-- and *familiar* looking feathers.

Immediately, his hand goes over his shoulder.

His fingers find their way into the soft down on the base of his right wing.

"My wings...?" He hears himself say, voice cracking from disuse. "They're... they're *back* ..."

Phil rubs his back gently, just below his wings. "They are," he confirms. "Just the same as before. I didn't actually... expect they'd come back, but I'm glad they did."

He draws in a ragged breath. His fingers obsessively pet at his feathers.

They're back. They're really there, heavy and *real* as ever. The ache and pain that had dragged him down since he lost them is completely gone, and they're back. It's like they were never severed from his back, never harshly chopped off of him.

"How did you... bring me back?" He asks.

Before he can get an answer, Techno steps out of a doorway to their left, followed by a smaller figure with... light pink hair? Lighter than his, but still very pink.

It isn't until he sees her wings that it clicks. That's Niki, her hair cut short and dyed pink, standing next to his younger brother with her hand wrapped in his.

Wilbur blinks uncomprehendingly at the pair of them.

Techno doesn't look... quite the same as he remembers. He can't recall *exactly* when he last saw him, but he can distinctly remember that air of superiority and pride around him, a surprisingly put-together sense of style, and a lot more *red* . Whether it be fabric or blood.

He's... not like that, now. His hair is pulled back in a ponytail, only his fringe loose to frame his face, and he's wearing a pair of glasses he doesn't recognize. He's dressed in casual clothing, a loose shirt and dark pants. No shoes, just socks. He's not holding himself with the rigid, straight posture of a warrior; he's almost cowering, actually, shoulders hunched and head ducked a little.

Niki looks different, too. Her hair is different, obviously, but there's a new wariness to her face, a tiredness to her blue eyes. She's also dressed casually, which looks somehow strange in this situation. There's a small smear of blood on her chin and she's frowning, tense.

They both look *tense*, really. Techno is looking down, his eyes on the wooden floor, and Niki's wings are visibly twitching against her back.

"The boys are asleep," she says gently, nodding back towards the door. "Tommy has a little bit of a fever, and--"

Wilbur tunes her out after that. Tommy is there? Their family is. Somehow together, again? With Niki there, too, for some reason. He's not about to complain about it.

But. *Tommy* is there. His little brother is apparently a room away.

He doesn't know why he was so tense about it, but the fact that he knows he's safe makes him slump down into himself, hugging his arms.

"That's good," Phil says next to him, addressing Niki. "He'll need a lot of rest. And I'm sure Ranboo will as well, magic is... fairly draining to be around, for endermen. I don't think they'll be getting up for a while."

The words are almost *nonsensical* ; who is *Ranboo* ? And *magic*... that must be how they brought him back, which he still hasn't gotten an answer about.

God. He's *back* . How is he back? He died, that's supposed to be where the story ends.

And yet. He's here, sitting on Techno's couch, alive and breathing.

He clears his throat. "*How did you bring me back?*"

Niki looks at him, eyes widening and glimmering. "*Oh* ." Her hands raise to clasp in front of her chest.

Techno looks at him with a suspicious expression. “You don’t remember?” He asks, crossing his arms.

Phil goes back to gently rubbing his back. “We performed a... ritual,” he says carefully. “It was difficult, but... it finally worked.” He’s smiling, though worriedly.

Wilbur hugs himself tighter. “I... I didn’t want to come back,” he whispers. “Why did you *do* that?”

Techno snorts, and he can see his tail whip behind his legs. “You *begged* us, Wil.”

He looks up and stares at him. “No, I *didn’t* .”

“Yes you did,” Niki insists, her voice less soft than before, *stronger* than before. “We tried to tell you it was risky. But you insisted...”

Wilbur grits his teeth, rage simmering under his confusion. “How did I beg you? I was *dead* .”

Phil’s hand pauses on his back. “You were a ghost,” he murmurs. “And you *asked* us.”

His eyes widen, and he jerks away from the gentle touch. “A ghost,” he says blankly. “I was a *ghost* .”

He pushes away from Phil and gets up from the couch. “How long have I been dead?” He asks, his voice a little hysterical.

“A few months,” Techno says, foot tapping in a steady rhythm on the floor. “You’ve been wanderin’ around as a ghost for a bit.”

Wilbur draws in a shaky breath and runs a hand through his hair. His wings twitch and flick out behind him, the way they slightly shift his weight both familiar and unknown. “I don’t...” He steps ever further from the couch, feeling unbalanced. “I don’t remember anything... from that.”

Uncomfortable silence.

His breathing is uneven, and his whole body is trembling. Fear and confusion and rage swirl together in his thoughts to form a thick cloud that curls around his mind, blurring his vision. “How did you bring me back?” He asks. “That... resurrections can’t *actually* be done, can they? That’s-- that’s impossible.”

He knows that much. He’s never been good at magic, but he’s read a fair few magical tomes before. He knows that resurrections are impossible, even *forbidden*.

But they obviously did it.

“It... it’s a little complicated, but essentially...” Phil sighs and tips his head back to look up at the ceiling. “You trade part of yourself to bring someone back. Part of your soul.”

The rage creeps up a little in intensity. “Who did the trade?” His voice comes out stronger and steelier than he remembers it ever being.

He doesn’t *want* to know the answer. But he *needs* to know.

He needs to know who, in this room, gave away part of their soul for him. Techno, who hates him? Niki, a close confidant and friend? Phil himself, his father despite all faults? Who would have given up part of themselves for *him* ?

He’s well aware that he fucked up almost all of his relationships before he died. So who would be willing to do that for him?

Phil glances over at Techno and Niki, the three of them making worried eye contact.

“It was Tommy,” Niki says, as gentle as possible. “It didn’t work the first few times, when Phil tried it. And-- well, I would have tried, but...” Her cheeks go a shade of pink almost matching her hair.

Wilbur can’t keep his anger hidden. He feels his teeth grit together and his wings spreading, feathers fluffing out. His hands are in fists and he can feel his nails biting into his palms.

“You let my little brother trade away part of his soul to bring me back to life,” he says, dangerously quiet. “You let a sixteen year old trade a piece of himself away to bring me back to life... even though I didn’t want to come back. Even though I *begged* to die.”

Phil stands up from the couch, expression somewhere near devastated, his mouth in a frown and his eyes dark. “He volunteered himself. I didn’t want to let him do it, but he... he was very sure of himself. You know how he can g-get.” He audibly swallows and runs a hand through his hair. “I kept him safe while he did it. But he *still* did it.”

His jaw hurts from how hard he’s gritting his teeth. There’s blood in a few places where his nails are cutting him. His vision is blurry with rage.

“I can’t believe you,” he gets out, throat tight.

He takes a step forward, closer to all three of them.

He feels even angrier when Techno steps forward as well, in front of Niki, close enough to rest his hand on Phil’s shoulder. In the light of the lanterns around the room, his eyes flash with gold light.

“We did what we thought you wanted,” Phil says, looking up at him with such honesty in his eyes that it almost feels real. “You-- your ghost asked us, you *insisted* , and we gave so much for this--”

Wilbur steps in until he’s directly in front of all three of them. Rage and adrenaline (probably from being revived, if he thinks about it) run through his veins like a dangerous drug, and suddenly all he wants is to hurt someone.

“I don’t *care* how much you had to give,” he says through clenched teeth. “I didn’t want this. You shouldn’t have even entertained the idea. Who knows what this is going to do to Tommy? He’s a *child* .”

“Do you think we didn’t *consider* that?” Techno asks, completely neutral despite the way he’s protecting Niki with his body and all but holding Phil in place with the hand on his shoulder. “We’re aware of the risk. We told Tommy how dangerous it could have been. But he survived it, and you’re back. So you might as well accept it.”

He makes a low warning sound. Niki chirps in alarm behind Techno, her hands visibly grabbing onto his arm. Phil’s eyes widen with recognition of the subtle threat.

And Techno just huffs and shakes his head.

Wilbur finally uncurls his fists. Blood runs down his palms in sticky trails, and it’s already beginning to dry on his nails.

“You shouldn’t have *done* this,” he says, still trembling with the weight of his emotions.

“If you’re going to keep actin’ like *this*, yeah, we shouldn’t have,” Techno replies, and the confident, sure way he says it has his blood boiling even more. “I get it. You were pulled back from whatever afterlife, you’re disoriented, you’re probably tired. But that’s no reason to act like we did this without thinkin’ about it.”

He knows he’ll achieve nothing with the action, but he balls one of his sore hands into a fist again and lurches forward to try and hit Techno. He doesn’t really know where he’s aiming, but the hatred he feels is thick and choking like the scent of rotting fruit and he needs to get some of it *out* .

Just as he expected, Phil pushes him away before he can make contact, holding him by the arms tightly to prevent him from trying again.

The tension in the air thickens and crackles like lightning.

“I didn’t want to come back,” Wilbur says, and this time, his voice is much, much weaker. “I wanted to *stay dead* .”

There’s no response, to that.

They all go quiet.

Chapter End Notes

go drink some water! or eat something! i just ate a bagel.

sorry that this one is shorter!

1) i didn't want to draw it out too much

2) i don't want to write it anymore. im done for now lol

the next one likely be longer! we get. Emotions.

and i said "hey man, isn't it poetic, that the sky is what we leave behind?"

Chapter Notes

mmmMMM hello folks. double update pog.

i see why i get burnt out sometimes. because oh boy do i have Thoughts about this fic and the general au like. 25/8. many thoughts, head full.

but!!! this is a big, fun chapter. many words in here, fellas.

warning for implied underage drinking/alcoholism, past abuse, violence, and generally not Great times. but it's mr innit's birthday in the narrative, baby! i gave him pain :-)

title from downhill by lincoln

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

They're sitting in comfortable silence in the living room.

Tommy is drawing in a new, fresh sketchbook. Niki gave it to him earlier, along with new colored pencils, all wrapped in a pretty, shiny red ribbon, tied into a new bow.

He hasn't had a birthday that he's felt happy during... in a long time.

If he's being honest, he had forgotten it was coming. He's had too much on his mind for the past few months to think about any sort of celebration.

He glances up from his sketchbook. He's trying to draw Techno, since he's very still right now, reading a book with a relaxed expression. He has his glasses on, and his hair pulled up in a high ponytail. One of the cats is curled on his lap, purring away, and he's absentmindedly petting him.

He looks back down, sketching out his eyelashes and the frame of his glasses in pink. He hasn't been able to really draw in a while, and he forgot how it felt.

(The last time he drew *anything* was during exile.

He was sitting next to the fire, wrapped up in a blanket to fight off the chill, and sketching on a piece of paper with a small stick of charcoal.

“What are you doing there, little bird?” Dream called, walking across the grass with a skinned, gutted rabbit in hand.

Tommy looked up from his paper. "Drawing." He hesitated when looking down, rolling the charcoal between his fingers and watching the black smear on his fingers. "Is that... okay?"

He hummed, skewering the rabbit on a long stick and positioning it over the fire to roast it. "Yeah, sure. Didn't take you for an artist, though."

He shrugged and muttered something about picking it up when he was small.)

He crosses his legs and balances the sketchbook on his knee, still looking between Techno and the paper. He has so many scars, they're kind of hard to draw.

Getting gifts in this kind of situation is... *weird* . He hadn't expected anything, he stopped expecting birthday presents when he was about fourteen, but Niki and Ranboo both got him gifts, and Techno has implied that he has something to give him later, and Phil made cinnamon rolls that morning for breakfast, which are one of his favorites.

Wilbur refused to give him *anything* . It definitely didn't make him cry.

"Can I look at what you're drawing?" Ranboo asks completely abruptly, suddenly next to him.

Tommy jumps a little. "Dude, you move so *quietly* ." He shakes his head, trying to calm his racing heart. "Yeah, you can look."

He hands the sketchbook over. He takes it, and quietly inspects it for a moment, looking between the page and Techno.

"This is... so *pretty* ," he says, trailing a claw along the lines. "I didn't know you could draw like this."

He shrugs. "I started doing it when I was younger. I've had... a lot of time to practice."

He breaks out in a grin, and hands the book back. "You're very talented."

His face feels warm. He tries to look down to hide it, but his feathers are all fluffed out because he's embarrassed. *Betrayal* .

"Thank you," he mumbles. "Maybe I'll draw *you* next."

He lets out a happy chittering sound, wrapping his arms around him in a frankly crushing hug. "If you want to!"

He laughs and gently extracts himself from the hug. "When I'm done with this."

Ranboo makes more happy noises, sitting politely next to him.

They continue to enjoy the silence. Tommy sketches out the shape of Techno's legs, the cat's head laying on his thigh, the curve of his clawed fingers petting his ears.

“Tommy?” Phil calls, standing at the front door with his coat on. It’s red and blue, edged with the same soft, white fur that’s on his own cloak. “Would you come outside with me for a minute?”

Tommy immediately feels a sense of anxiety. Oh *no* . “Uh... yeah, sure.” He puts his pencils back in the small, white case, and closes his sketchbook.

He gets up and grabs his cloak, pulling it on and securing it at his neck. He pulls on his boots, leaving them untied.

They step out onto the porch together. The sky is a bright, clear blue, dotted with thin clouds. It feels warmer than usual, though still fairly cold.

Phil stays quiet for a moment, standing at the porch railing, looking over the white-dressed land.

Tommy fidgets with the clasp on his cloak, running his fingers over the gold and emerald.

“Do you remember how I said I’d take you to L’manberg, if you wanted to see Tubbo?” Phil looks back at him, smiling faintly.

Tommy feels like he’s not breathing, for a moment. “I remember.”

He leans on the railing and crosses his arms. “Do you still want to go?”

His hands are shaking. He presses the palms of them to his pants to wipe away the thin sweat on his skin.

“Yeah, uh. I want to.”

There’s this horrible pit of anxiety and excitement in his stomach.

He should *know* better than to be excited about seeing Tubbo. God, he blinded Ranboo, he drove him out of the country, he’s a drunk, he’s apparently *violent and cruel*

--but he’s also his *best friend* . He hasn’t seen him beyond that terrible arrest in *four months*.

He misses him so much it hurts.

“Do you want to go today?”

His eyes are hot with tears. “Yeah. I-I really do.”

Phil grins. “We should fly, yeah?”

He nods aggressively.

-

Techno knows he can come off as paranoid, to some people. With his mind being a tightly-wound ball of anxiety, it’s fairly accurate.

But he's not being paranoid when he says that he thinks Wilbur *hates* them all, now.

Maybe not Tommy.

But the rest of them? They've earned some ire.

He's surprised by how much he remembers the small tells of his older brother's rage, especially because they were different during some of their last time together.

It seems that dying brought up the old ones.

It's all... subtle. Very subtle. Wilbur has a way of doing completely normal things in a way that clearly shows how angry he is. The turn of a doorknob, the setting-down of a glass, the way he clears his throat.

Right now, he's folding laundry. Usually, that's Tommy's job, but Tommy just left for... whatever he and Phil were going to do. Techno didn't really feel up to questioning them about it. But regardless, folding laundry is usually his little brother's job, and he likes doing it.

Wilbur doesn't seem very happy about having to do a menial chore. Techno feels no sympathy about it; he was like that when he was younger, too. There was a reason most household stuff fell to him, because Wilbur acted like a brat about it until he just took over.

He's folding laundry angrily. Which sounds like pure nonsense, but again, he has a way of doing that. It's something in how he straightens out the sleeves of a shirt, the hems of pants, the corners of their blankets.

It's... bothering him, but he isn't exactly showing it.

Techno flips the page in his book and scratches under the cat's chin as he reads. Of course, the cat purrs and snuggles his soft face into his hand.

He never felt very interested in cats, but when they showed up just after Niki and Ranboo came out here... well, he wasn't going to leave the two poor things out in the cold. He can be cruel, but he isn't *heartless*.

And. Okay, he'll admit it. They're cute as hell. And they seem to make Ranboo more comfortable, which is always good.

Right now, Ranboo is helping Niki make a cake, the both of them at her house for the time. She'll bring it over later. He had offered to help, but she had quietly told him she wanted some time with just the younger boy, because they hadn't really gotten to... talk about things very much, since the resurrection process started. He understood, and let them both go on their own way.

He finishes the chapter he was on, and hums to himself. He could read more, but he needs to finish up Tommy's gift.

He marks his place in the book with a red ribbon, and closes it, setting it on the sidetable. He nudges the cat off his lap, chuckling to himself when he yawns widely and flops onto his side. "Don't be like that," he scolds gently. "I'll be back."

The cat raises his head lazily, left ear twitching. He blinks slowly and falls back to the cushion.

Same, he thinks.

He yawns and stretches his arms over his head, going over to the ladder into the loft.

For the past few days, he's been... moving very cautiously, completely unconsciously. It turns out, bringing a person who had done a lot of damage to you into your home can cause you to feel just as scared and small as you did when it all happened.

Who knew.

Techno hums to himself as he climbs the ladder, and then walks to the bed. He kneels next to it and pulls the long, cloth-wrapped weapon from below it.

It's a scythe.

He noticed, when Tommy was helping him with the farm, well before the resurrection-- but after he got past the necessary questioning of "how are you growing literally any plants out here, are you magic?"-- that he seemed to be really enjoying himself, using the sickle he keeps for the wheat.

Specifically, he had climbed up onto the wall around the farm and wielded the tool like a weapon, grinning proudly. "I look pretty cool with this, don't I?" he asked, cheerful as ever. "Very strong and dramatic."

And... well, Techno kind of filed that away. He's not sure why it stuck out so much.

But... he started working on the scythe that evening. Keeping it hidden from everyone hasn't been easy, since making a large weapon is a bit of an obvious project, but no one had questioned it.

The weapon itself is finished, all gleaming netherite and strong lines, he just needs to add the last few touches. He guesses that he has a few hours until Tommy and Phil get back.

He gets to work.

Usually, he marks his weapons with gold flowers. He isn't sure when he started doing that, but it's become something normal to him.

This one... this one is getting red roses.

They seem fitting, for his little brother.

The air is cool and pleasant against Tommy's cheeks as they descend towards L'manberg's outskirts. It's much warmer here-- spring is definitely blooming. He can smell flowers and growing things.

They land lightly on a patch of flower-covered grass inside a small wooded area. Tommy feels a little too warm in his thick shirt and pants. At least he left his cloak at home.

He hasn't been here in months. He's not even *supposed* to be here.

His palms are sweaty again and he's biting his lip a lot.

Phil glances up at him. He can see the subtle tension in his expression; the tightness around his jaw, the way his eyes are narrowed with suspicion as he looks around.

"We should get going," he says, and his voice is still cheerful, as it was earlier.

He nods. They take each other's hand and walk off through the trees, down a small pathway, just wide enough for them to walk side by side.

It's peaceful. Spring is definitely starting here; there are flowers in the grass and along the edges of the underbrush, and budding leaves on the trees. The air is warm and smells fresh with growing plants and rain.

Tommy forgot how much he liked seeing everything so *alive*.

They walk quietly for a while. He knows this area; it's usually where he'd take off for night flights when he still lived here.

He stares up at the sky through the gaps in the trees. It's so blue. Out in the tundra, the sky is usually grey. But here... it's so bright and blue.

He draws in a shaky breath. This could be risky. But Phil is going to keep him safe, right? If anything comes up... he's as safe as he could be, at the Angel of Death's side.

He's still nervous. Something feels dangerous about this, as picturesque as the spring scenery is.

They dodge through a small opening in a thin patch of trees. It opens into a narrow clearing, wide, dotted with cornflowers and daisies.

At the other side of the thin clearing, Dream is standing, facing them, arms crossed as he leans on a thick oak tree. His axe is strapped along his back and he has a bag thrown over his shoulder.

Tommy's breath gets stuck somewhere in his throat. Immediately, his hand goes to Phil's shoulder, and grips him tightly.

"It's fine," Phil soothes quietly, reaching up to squeeze his hand. "I'll handle it."

Dream tilts his head at them, his mask mockingly cheerful. He steps away from the tree and walks across the grass, stopping only a few feet in front of them.

Tommy grips his father's shoulder tighter. Every muscle in his body is tense, and he can hear a grating sound that he's fairly sure is his teeth grinding together.

Phil draws his sword and stands in an obviously *defensive* position in front of him. "What do you want?" He asks, his voice cold.

Dream chuckles, and raises his hands innocently. "Come on now. Put the sword away, I don't mean any harm."

He makes a warning sound. His wings ruffle against his back. "You don't expect me to believe that after you tried to *kidnap him* , do you?"

Tommy hiccups on a small, frightened chirp.

"I know it's a little contradictory," Dream says smoothly. "But I wouldn't do anything to hurt him on his *birthday* ."

He bites hard into his cheek. He can taste blood.

Phil raises his head to glare up at him, expression otherwise passive and cool. He doesn't say anything, just looks at him with disapproval and suspicion.

"I even brought him a gift." Dream moves the bag off his shoulder, and digs around in it. "I think you'll like it, little bird."

All of Tommy's feathers raise, and he drops his hand from his father's shoulder to instead wrap his arms around himself. "I don't want your present."

He tilts his head again. "Are you sure? It's something you lost during exile."

He tenses even further. No, *no*, **no** .

"I'm not letting you give him anything, because I don't trust your motives." Phil says flatly. "Get out of our way. I won't hesitate to kill you."

Dream laughs, completely unintimidated by the threat. "You're *paranoid* , aren't you? I see where Technoblade learned it from." The slight makes his eyes widen. "I promise, I'm being completely honest. It's just something he lost, I thought it'd be nice if I gave it back for his birthday."

Tommy swallows thickly. "I-it's fine. I'll take it."

Phil turns around to look at him. He looks him over, brows furrowed, mouth curled into a frown. He's holding his sword so tight his knuckles are white. "Are you sure?"

He nods, keeping his face as passive and strong as he can. "Yeah."

He watches him for another moment, before nodding sharply and stepping aside. "Alright. Go ahead."

He stays close, within arms reach.

Tommy bites into his cheek again and steps forward. "What is it?"

Dream hums, pulling a folded brown garment out of his bag. He grits his teeth at the sight of the L'manberg flag patch on the visible front.

"This is yours, isn't it?" He asks, voice dripping with that false sincerity. "You lost it."

He reaches forward and takes it from him. He unfolds it, and stares at Wilbur's old coat for a long, choked moment.

"Y-you fixed it," he says weakly. "You... t-tore the sleeve off, before I lost it." He pauses. "Before you *took* it."

Dream swings his bag into his shoulder again, and puts his hands in the pocket of his hoodie. "I never *took* it. You're the one who left it by the stream."

Rage suddenly burns hot in his stomach. He grits his teeth and wipes his teary eyes. "I was taking a bath. You fucking *stole* it."

"And *you* stole it off the corpse of your older brother," he counters.

Tommy folds the jacket over his arm. "Fuck you," he spits. "Get out of our way. I'm *not* listening to you anymore."

Dream chuckles again, low and mean. "Sure thing, little bird. Happy birthday, glad to see you're feeling like your old self again."

He moves just one step forward, and raises a hand towards his face.

Tommy immediately goes tense. His eyes widen and his whole body goes stiff in anticipation of the contact. He's not sure if he's more scared of the gentle caress or the harsh strike.

Phil makes a horrible warning sound, something low and growling, a cry and a scream mixed. He's quickly between them, holding his sword against Dream's neck.

"*Do not touch him*," he says in a low, terrifying voice. "*Or I'll make you wish you never crawled out of whatever hole you were born in.*"

Dream had promptly raised his hands again when he stepped forward, false innocence oozing from him. "*Easy*, star shine," he drawls, "I wasn't going to hurt him."

Tommy draws in a ragged breath, and steps back. He clutches the coat close and brings it up to his face, so he can hide in it.

It still smells like lemon and stone and just a little bit of cigarette smoke.

His eyes burn. God. That just makes him even more upset, considering how Wilbur has been acting for the time he's been resurrected. He hasn't done anything outright horrible, but... their first interaction after his long rest wasn't the warm, comforting meeting he hoped it would be.

(He doesn't know what exactly he expected. But walking into the kitchen to find all the adults standing in tense silence and looking at each other was definitely not it.

"...good morning," Tommy tried hesitantly, standing at the edge of the kitchen area. "Is... something going on?"

Wilbur had been first to turn to him. And that's when he saw the first oddity-- there's a streak of gold in his hair, sticking out sorely against his warm brown curls.

"...you look terrible," he had said, almost immediately, his eyes wide with shock.

Again, he didn't know what he expected.)

Dream gives another mean laugh. "So, you're going to see Tubbo, aren't you?" He asks, aiming his hidden gaze at Tommy.

He hugs the coat and stares at the ground, trying not to cry.

"That's none of your business and you *know* it," Phil grits out. "I said get out of our way."

He hums mockingly. "Sure, sure. Don't expect anything serious from him, he's not... exactly in a happy state." He steps back and puts his hands in his pocket again. "See you around, Philza, little bird." He nods towards Tommy before turning to walk away, whistling.

Tommy swallows a sob and loosens his grip on the coat. "That... wasn't good."

Phil sighs and sheaths his sword again. "I didn't expect him to show up." He takes his hand and squeezes it, before releasing him. "Do you want to head home? Seeing Tubbo might be too much, after that..."

He shakes his head and runs his hand through his hair, undoing his ponytail. He combs out the tangles with his fingers in an attempt to stall answering.

He should probably say yes. He should probably go home. He should probably go home and eat the birthday cake Niki is currently baking and get whatever Techno's gift is.

But they're already here. And he wants to see Tubbo so badly.

Tommy swallows his hesitation, and ties his hair up again. "No, I want to do it. We're already here, it'd be a waste of a flight."

Phil's eyebrows knit together in concerned confusion. "Are you sure?"

He nods. He takes his hand again, and they walk on.

-

Niki pokes her tongue out of her mouth as she spreads the icing on the cake. She's almost done with the proper, smooth layer of the vanilla frosting. She just needs to decorate it, and then she'll be finished.

Baking has always kept her mind off unnecessary stress. And she's... definitely feeling some of that, right now.

She didn't know that looking at Wilbur for the first time, in his resurrected form, would be so painful.

But when she laid her eyes on him... it just hurt, in some deep, deep part of her heart.

He looked... almost right, but something is subtly wrong about him. There's a streak of gold in his hair, now, but Phil had mentioned that would likely happen when they used the totem of undying. There's gold feathers in his wings now, too, all too stark against the soft cream shade of them.

And his eyes. *She* can't quite put her finger on what's wrong with them, but... it's something. They're just a little bit too... *bright*, yet dulled. Like something that needs to be there isn't.

Or maybe she's just looking too much into it.

But she thinks she's right. Bringing him back... it's definitely going to have *consequences*.

She smooths out the frosting one more time, before setting the metal spatula she was using aside. It looks nice, really. It's not her fanciest cake, but Tommy probably wouldn't appreciate a very extravagant cake. She had *barely* been able to get his favorite cake flavor out of him.

"...it's strawberry," he had reluctantly admitted. "But you don't have to make me *anything*, I'm serious. I'll be fine."

She had assured him it wasn't any trouble, and went off to start baking. Ranboo joined her, and Techno offered his help as well.

There was an emotion similar to panic in his eyes. It... was hard to say no.

She just felt like she needed to get Ranboo... out of the cabin for a little bit. Techno had understood, of course. But she still feels bad about it.

Now, she grabs her piping bag and turns her attention to drawing small, delicate designs along the cake. "Ranboo?" She calls, while turning the cake stand. "Do you want to come help me?"

Ranboo makes a surprised noise, and she can hear him jump at the kitchen table. His knees hit the underside of the table and he says a few (probably crass) words in ender. "U-uh, yeah, sure." He gets up, wincing as he stretches his legs. "How can I help?"

Niki hums. “You can help me by turning it. Unless you want to help with the decorating itself...?”

He frowns. “No... no, I think I’m good just helping a little bit.”

She nods. They work quietly for a few minutes.

“...you knew Wilbur for a long time before he died, right?” Ranboo asks, his tone implacable.

Niki finishes off a semi-floral curl of yellow icing on the side of the cake. “I did. We were...” she trails off. She isn’t... *sad* about his death anymore, but there is an ache where her deep, strong feelings for him used to live. “We were very good friends.”

“Huh.” He turns the stand so she can work on an empty part of the cake. “Was he... this angry, before?”

When she glances up, she can see the unusually scared expression on his face. “Not really,” she says gently. “I mean... sometimes.”

She recalls the manic light in his eyes, the way his grin seemed almost skeletal in the campfire’s light.

The ache worsens. She swallows against the lump in her throat. “Are you... scared of him, Ranboo?”

He looks over at the window. “...a little. I just... get a bit of a bad feeling from him? And Tommy talked to me some, about how he used to act. So I think I’m just anxious.”

Niki smiles as best she can, finishing the curls of icing she was working on. “It’s alright. That whole resurrection... I can’t imagine that was easy for you to be around.”

Ranboo frowns, tail flicking behind him. “It was... pretty terrible. The magic made me all jittery.” His mouth pulls up in a small smile. “But I think I’m good now.”

She chooses to believe him for now, instead of putting more worry on herself. She can only handle so much at once. “How does it look?” She asks, redirecting the conversation.

He chirps quietly, looking over the dessert. “It looks pretty. I like all the... hm. Is that yellow?” She nods. His smile goes wide and cheerful. “Yes! I got it right. It looks blue to me.”

“Weird,” she says succinctly. He giggles. “It’s good, though, that you’re figuring out how to work with everything. Do you still feel all unbalanced all the time?”

“Only a little, now... I’m getting used to it. It’s weird not to see depth like I used to,” he sighs. “I almost fell off the porch because I wasn’t able to see where the railing stopped.”

She muffles a laugh in her hand. “That wouldn’t be great.” She picks up the cake and sets it far back on her counter. “Alright, that’s done. Now all we have left to do is wait for them to

get back.”

-

Tommy has bitten a hole in his lower lip out of worry.

Walking through L'manberg is... a bit scary. No one bothers them, but he can see eyes peering through windows.

(There used to be... more people, here. Not really *people*, so much as... flickering shades. Some kind of *apparition*, drawn in by the collective desire of the founders of L'manberg to have a thriving country.

But not anymore.)

They make their way to Tubbo's house without being bothered again.

Hopefully they've escaped notice.

His hands are damp with sweat again. He's sure if he speaks, he's going to stutter, and he hates it when he stutters.

Phil stands next to him on the doorstep, a hand resting on his back. “Are you alright?” He asks gently.

Tommy takes a shaky breath and nods. “Y-yeah, I think so.”

He wipes his palms dry, before balling up one hand in a fist and knocking firmly on the wooden door.

He's surprised by the sounds he immediately receives in response— a loud clatter, something shattering, and furious swearing.

He starts fiddling with the line of stitching at the bottom of his shirt.

After a moment, heavy footsteps approach the door, before it opens.

He's also *surprised* by Tubbo's appearance.

Politely put, he looks like hell. His hair has gotten unruly and needs a trim, it's brown curls sticking up in every direction around his horns and furry ears. It looks a bit greasy, too. His mismatched eyes are glassy and completely bloodshot.

His clothes are awry, and appear to be nothing more than pajamas. A grey shirt, a size too big, hangs loose around his frame, and the soft pants he's wearing are patterned with little bees and flowers. He remembers those pants; they've been his favorite for a while.

He looks like all those memories of the worst two years at home (had it only been two years?) and it hurts, a little.

Tubbo blinks up at him, leaning heavily on the doorframe, those shiny red eyes widening. "...Tommy?" He asks, and even his *voice* is rough and slurred.

Tommy smiles and awkwardly waves a hand. "Hey, Tubbo."

He's not sure what he expects. Happiness, maybe. Shock. Confusion.

He doesn't expect anger, that's for damn sure.

But immediately, Tubbo's eyes narrow into furious slits and his hands curl into fists. He straightens his posture, leaning up as much as he can without getting on his tiptoes. "What the *hell* do you think you're doing here?" He gets out through gritted, sharp teeth. "You have no right to just, just *do* this to me!"

Tommy feels his own eyes widen. Phil's hand stiffens against his back, and he can hear his breathing hitch just slightly.

"...what?" Tommy asks, quietly. "Tubbo, what are you *talking* about?"

His already red cheeks flush darker, and he makes an annoyed sound that makes his feathers raise. "You can't be *serious*," he spits. "You *faked your death*, Tommy! You faked your death a-and we had to have a fucking *funeral* for you! And I didn't even find out that you were alive from *you*! I had to read it in R-Ranboo's stupid *book*!"

Tommy's mouth feels dry.

He hasn't. Seen Tubbo this angry, not in a long time.

Not even the fight they had before he was exiled was this bad. He's properly *enraged*, viciousness pouring off every word and motion.

(The last time they fought like this... it had to have been when they were both about fourteen, and Tommy had just gotten into a fight with Wilbur. And... well. They had a lot of alcohol in the house, back then.

He didn't drink a lot, but he was still fourteen and it was enough to get him obviously drunk.

And... Tubbo didn't really like seeing that.)

He's not... at *all* right. He was *misinformed*, obviously. Dream told him he was dead, and he either fabricated this story himself or was told it after learning he was alive. If he talks it out with him...

He forces a smile, despite the pit in his stomach. "I didn't *fake my death*," he says as gently as he can. "I really didn't. I-- well, Dream was kind of..." he stumbles over the words for a moment. "He was kind of k-keeping me captive. He hurt me a lot. S-so I ran away. I didn't *die*."

Tubbo only bares his teeth further and crosses his arms over his chest. "Gods, you *have* to be kidding me," he spits again. "You're such a fucking liar. I have the *note*, Tommy!"

Note?

He feels like he's not hearing anything correctly.

This isn't how it's supposed to be. Tubbo was supposed to be happy that he was here. *He* was supposed to be happy he was here.

But he's so angry. So angry, eyes flickering and vicious, hands in fists so tight he can see the veins sticking out on the back of his palms.

"That wasn't my note," Tommy says, a little too quietly. "I didn't... I d-didn't leave a note. I didn't want Dream to follow me. He... he lied to you, Tubbo, I'm sorry--"

"Shut up!" Tubbo strikes his hand against the door. The loud thud makes him stumble back, almost falling off the step, and Phil only barely steadies him. "You're lying! I have the note, it's in your handwriting, you lied to all of us! You lied to us, you hid from us, you're so fucking selfish!"

He wraps his arms around the coat, still in his arms, and stares with an inappropriately fearful and cold feeling in his stomach. "T-Tubbo, I'm..." he licks his lips, trying to banish the dryness he feels in his mouth. "I swear, I'm *not* lying. I didn't fake my death. I just ran away, and I've been... recovering, I guess. I was really hurt, a-and sick, and things have just been... *complicated* . This is the first time I've been... ready to come here."

He has to *listen* . He has to see the reality of this. He had to stop being so convinced that this is what's actually happening. Because it's *not* , Tommy would never do that to him or *anyone* .

It doesn't work. Of course it doesn't work.

Tubbo's rage only seems to rise. His mouth curls into a deeper frown. "So I'm supposed to believe that you didn't lie, because you were off 'recovering'? That you were just somewhere *getting better* . You just disappeared for months, hiding out with your older brother and your *father* ," he shoots a harsh look at Phil, lip curling to reveal more of his teeth, "who have hurt you more than I ever could. And you didn't think to tell me in *any way* ."

Tommy pulls at the stitches on his shirt. "I-I... I was sick, a-and... and I was scared to come back, I was scared you'd just drive me out--"

"Of course I'm going to fucking drive you out!" He snaps, stepping back in the doorway. "Get the hell out here. Away from my house, away from my country, away from *me* ."

He swallows thickly. His eyes are hot and he can feel tears gathering on his lashes. "Tubbo--" He reaches a hand in, wanting to touch his best friend, give him a hug, just feel him *near* again.

This didn't go like he imagined, not at all, and he hopes it's a horrible nightmare. He's had these nightmares before.

He closes his eyes for just a moment, breathing as evenly as he can. He needs to wake up. Wake up. Wake up. Wake up.

Suddenly, his back meets the door and there's a knife against his throat. His eyes fly open again, and this definitely isn't a dream.

All he can see is his best friend's red-rimmed, blue-green eyes. The knife is cold and sharp against his skin.

He fleetingly wonders if it's the same knife he used to blind Ranboo.

"Get. Out." Tubbo spits. "Or I'll kill you myself."

He blinks a few times. Tears roll down his cheeks.

Tubbo roughly pulls away, holding the knife in his hand, staring him down. There are no words for the hate he can see in his eyes.

He gets the message. He bites into his lower lip and turns away from the house, walking away without even glancing back.

Phil follows him, of course. They walk in a shocked silence for a few minutes, at each other's sides, staring at the ground.

Tommy hugs Wilbur's old coat close. The tears flowing from his eyes aren't accompanied by sobs or much physical movement-- he's too stunned and upset for that. His crying is silent, this time.

"I... didn't think he'd be like that," Phil says, tone careful. "I didn't think he could even *get* like that."

He wipes his tears on his sleeve. "Y-yeah, I didn't either..." The tears don't stop, and he's starting to sniffle like a little kid. "I... I don't know why I thought he wouldn't be... awful. He already hurt Ranboo."

But I thought it would be different with me, he thinks.

"I'm sorry," his father says softly, reaching over to touch his arm. "I wouldn't have brought you here if I knew he'd be like that."

He wipes more tears from his eyes, sniffling to keep his nose from running. "It's okay. 'S not your fault he's..." *drunk, unstable, cruel, violent*, "...not well."

He swallows an odd grief. It's not like what he felt when Wilbur died, or even like what he felt when Phil left, all those years ago. Those were distinct sorts of grief, of pain, of loss. Because he thought that he wouldn't get to ever see either of them again.

But he has a not too far fetched belief that he will get to see Tubbo again.

It's just not going to be in any sort of positive way.

“I think I just want to go home,” he says weakly. He unfolds the coat in his arms and pulls it on, because the crying has made him feel cold and vulnerable. It’s familiarly heavy and warm around his body.

“We can do that,” he says, lifting a hand to wipe his tears off his cheeks. “Niki should be done with the cake by the time we’re back. That’ll be nice.”

He laughs thickly. “Y-yeah.”

They keep walking.

This time, as they walk, Tommy does get the sense they’re being observed. Not by the few shades of a population that linger.

But by something more *alive*.

He’s felt mildly paranoid ever since they ran into Dream. This doesn’t feel like paranoia, though; he’s quite aware of how it feels to be *watched*.

He keeps walking, of course, but he lets his eyes drag over any dark space between buildings, any sort of hiding place.

He doesn’t see anything.

But he hears something, after a while. When they make it back to the clearing, and are about to take off, he hears a shuffle of leaves and branches.

It could be nothing more than wildlife moving about the trees.

But.

It could be something else, too.

Tommy’s hand drifts toward the knife he keeps on his belt, as he steps quietly towards where he heard the noise.

“What is it?” Phil asks, confused.

“Did you hear that?” he asks right back, not taking his eyes from the brush. “I feel like someone is following us.”

He chirps quietly and comes to his side, observing the trees as well. “I did hear... *something*.”

They both fall very quiet as they stand and listen.

For almost a minute, there’s nothing.

And then, another shuffle, followed by a small noise, nothing but a quiet vocalization.

Phil rests his hand on his sword, and steps closer to the treeline. Something is obviously in the trees, trying to keep itself quiet.

The sunlight shifts just right. It's creeping up on mid-afternoon, and the shades of the light are becoming deeper shades of orange that light up the branches of the trees.

Between the gap of two thick branches, Tommy can just see a flash of... something shiny. Metal, of some kind, maybe. It shines in the light for just a moment or two, before it vanishes, followed by quick footsteps and sticks breaking.

The breaking sounds seem to indicate whoever is following them running away.

Which seems. Nonsensical.

If it was Dream... he wouldn't have heard it. He's sure of that. He seems to be able to move completely silently.

Who else would be following them? Tubbo seemed in no state to be leaving the house.

Maybe someone else. Other old friends, ones who... didn't seem too interested in helping him at all.

Quackity, maybe? He showed a little *too* much interest in what Phil was doing before he left the country for good. Maybe he didn't like seeing him return, maybe he's trying to figure out what their reason for returning was. It's fairly obvious, considering how their confrontation was semi-public, but maybe he thinks it's a diversion of some kind?

Fundy is also... an option. He's not sure what he's been doing. And the speed at which their observer ran off would definitely fit him, with as light as he is on his feet. And they were apparently up in the trees, fairly high too. He's so light, he's well aware of how good the younger boy is at climbing trees. So that's another possibility.

There are... a lot of people who could be watching, but the idea of entertaining all of them kind of makes Tommy a bit nauseous.

He just wants to go home and eat cake and put this out of his mind until he goes to bed.

"Let's just... leave," he mutters, turning away from the trees.

Phil gives a silent nod, and they take off into the sky.

Flying helps to banish some of his fears.

-

They get home as the sky is darkening. The air is still and cold, and a light snow begins to fall as they land.

"There's snow on my feathers," Tommy whines quietly. He draws his wings in close to protect them from the snowflakes. "Cold, *cold*."

Phil laughs, taking his hand and tugging him towards the cabin. "Come on then, let's get inside."

He follows obediently, a little excited. He's tired and there's still so much on his mind, from the disaster that was their trip, but he's excited to see his family and have a nice evening. It's going to be fine.

They get inside, kicking a bit of ice and snow off their shoes before stepping in.

Ranboo is setting the table, making little chirpy noises as he does so. Wilbur is standing by one of the back windows, staring out of it with his back to them. Niki is at the counter with Techno, making plates for everyone.

"You got home just in time," Niki says cheerfully, carrying two plates to the table.

Tommy finds that his smile comes very naturally at the sight of his family putting everything together for dinner. "I'm glad, because... flying makes me very hungry." He goes to sit down at the table, but pauses next to it. "Is there... anything I can to do help?"

"Nope, sit down," Techno calls without looking up from the pan he's stirring. "We're all good."

He raises his brows. It's not an unusual response, but it always feels weird to not help. But... eh. It's his birthday, and he's had a rough time today. He can accept just sitting and waiting for dinner.

Ranboo sits down next to him after getting the table straightened out. "Where did you two go?" He asks. "You were gone for a while."

Tommy bites his sore lip, and fights his flinch down. "Uh... I don't really wanna talk about it yet."

His brows raise, but he nods respectfully. "Okay, we can talk about it later."

He smiles gratefully and turns to his place as Techno sets his plate down.

They eat dinner together. They had to get a new table, after Niki and Ranboo came out here, which was kind of hilarious to him. But now they all fit, even Wilbur.

Wilbur hasn't really... even looked at him much, today. Any time that he's not seeming to be stewing in his thoughts, he's just ignoring everyone. It hasn't been... that long since the resurrection, so maybe he's just. Dealing with it, still.

That makes sense. That's better than him just ignoring all of them out of anger.

After dinner, they have cake. Tommy gets a little choked up by the sight of the artful, elegant decorations on the cake.

He had mentioned that very 'birthday' looking cakes are weird to him, and Niki seems to have taken it to heart-- instead of any birthday wishes or his name, it's just covered in these

beautiful, subtle yellow swirls and lines, all dusted with something that makes them shine slightly.

He's sure he nearly crushed her in the resulting hug, but she accepted it gleefully, standing on her tiptoes to hug him just as tight around the shoulders.

When he's done, he's had entirely too much cake, and he's enough removed from the exhaustion of the day that he actually feels... okay.

He's just about to sit down with his sketchbook again when he's waylaid by Techno.

He's holding something behind his back, and he looks uncharacteristically sheepish. Even for the nicer version of him that he's gotten since the execution, the shyness is... odd.

Tommy raises his eyebrows and stands in front of him, amused yet a tiny bit anxious. "What is it?"

Techno's mouth twitches around a nervous smile. "Uh, well. I figured I should actually give you a birthday gift. I didn't think I'd get it finished today, but... I did." His smile only gets more crooked yet earnest. "Hold your hands out?"

He does, holding them out eagerly. He's excited, now; there's a small part of him that's childishly pleased by his big brother offering him a present.

He moves whatever he was holding in front of himself. It's something almost impractically tall, and tipped with a long, curved blade, glinting a dangerous purple in the warm light...

He places it in his hands, and he wraps them around the long handle of the weapon.

It's a scythe. He's holding a scythe.

"You..." Tommy starts, a giddy excitement welling inside of him. He adjusts his grip on the scythe and tests its weight in his hands. It's so light... "You got me a *scythe*?"

Techno outright grins, fiddling with his wrist braces. "Made it, actually."

He bursts out into excited laughter. He transfers his scythe (*His* scythe! His! *Property of TommyInnit* , baby!) to his right hand and throws his left arm around Techno in a tight embrace. He ignores the quiet 'oof' he gives. "Thank you!" He says, a little too loudly. "This is so cool!"

He steps back and takes the weapon in both hands again, bringing it in close to look at the blade. On the gleaming purple-black surface that's obviously enchanted, there are what look like shimmery red roses, rendered in a careful hand. They're gorgeous and subtle and he could cry.

He feels like he did when he was eight and offered a sword for the first time; excited and eager and far too ready to do something reckless with the weapon.

“Can I go outside and... try it out?” He asks, only a little nervous. He’s too giddy to really be anxious about asking for more, but... it’s always going to linger.

Techno tilts his head a bit, still grinning. “Yeah, sure. The sun’s down by now, so there’s *plenty* of mobs out there for you to test it on.” He pauses for a moment, before raising a brow. “Go ahead.”

Tommy laughs some more and hurries over to grab his cloak, setting his scythe down to pull them on.

“Ohhh, that looks so cool!” Ranboo gasps, getting up from the couch to come over and look at the weapon. “Techno made that for you?”

He nods, tying his boots. “It’s... so nice,” he says, a bit softer now. His smile is a little trembly.

“He gave you a scythe,” Wilbur says, disapproval dripping off his tone. He’s sitting in the armchair, leaning forward with his folded arms on his knees. “Because the ideal thing to give an unstable seventeen year old is a weapon that he can use to hurt people.”

Techno makes a dismissive noise, walking over to sit down on the couch. “Quit bein’ so petty,” he snaps. “I gave him a gift he likes. That’s all that matters.”

Wilbur raises his eyebrows and huffs. “It’s impractical and dangerous. Exactly something you’d give someone.”

Tommy looks down, biting his tongue to keep from engaging. He doesn’t want to start a fight. But now he looks at the scythe with slightly different eyes; the eagerness is fading with his eldest brother’s words.

He can’t think about the work that must have gone into that weapon. Work that probably wore Techno out, especially with how his hands are obviously not healthy; he hasn’t said as much, but the way he flinches having to use them some days and the braces he wears are proof enough.

And yet, he willingly put that work into making a gorgeous weapon for *Tommy*, of all people.

He’s getting choked up again. His eyes feel hot with tears and there’s some kind of weird... *guilt*, in his stomach. Like he felt for so long, when he first got here.

It’s not ideal, honestly. He’s pretty sure Techno is happy that he’s here. And he also knows he likes to give people things.

But when he looks down at his scythe, he feels all the anxiety and negative feelings of the day pile on top of him.

Abruptly, he stands, snatching his coat (Wilbur’s coat) from the hooks near the door and pulling it on. He grabs the scythe and holds it tightly. He calls a vague goodbye to his family inside, before hurrying out.

The faint snowfall from earlier has stopped. The lantern on the porch is weakly lit, and only pale light shines on the cover on the ground.

Tommy grits his teeth against the rush of negative emotions. His scythe feels light and easy to move in his hands.

He hears the groan of a zombie, and he turns his gaze to the very edge of where the light reaches. The undead creature is slowly walking closer to the house, surely drawn in by the scent of living flesh.

He walks down the steps, steadying the weapon in his hands. He stands directly in the zombie's path, and it makes a gurgling sound, blackish liquid dripping down its chin.

He's surprised by how easily he's able to swing the scythe and bury its blade in the creature's chest. He can hear bones snap and flesh tear. It groans and drops its outstretched arms, looking down in what's almost confusion at the weapon in its chest.

He almost smiles.

He rips the blade from its torso, and repeats the swing, hitting it in the neck this time. It makes a strange noise as its throat is partially severed, and it falls back into the snow, blood pooling around it.

He turns his sight to a spider. He's able to cut two legs off before sinking his blade in its head.

Then a creeper. Two skeletons, dressed in ragged blueish-grey clothes and moving easily through the snow. Another zombie, this one with a hole already in its ribcage.

He transfers his emotions into the violence. He's never really... done that, before, but it feels good. He can pretend that he's fixing something like this.

He kills a skeleton. (Dream's self-confident ways while putting something almost tailored to make him break in his hands. The way he seemed to know it was hurting him.)

He uses the side of his scythe to bat away a spider and then stab it through its midsection. (Tubbo's angry, irrational rant about him faking his death. The knife against his throat. *Away from me*.)

It becomes... normal. He's surprisingly graceful with the weapon; it just feels right.

By the time he next thinks about what he's doing, he's wandered a decent way away from the cabin.

His scythe is smeared with various kinds of blood. He's been crying; his tears are cold, half-frozen on his cheeks. He forgot to button his coat and it blows open in the mild wind.

He's near the frozen lake. The shiny surface of the ice glows under the bright moonlight.

He tilts his head back to stare at the sky.

The clouds have cleared, for once.

He can see hundreds, thousands, millions, *billions* of stars above him.

Tommy tries to just open his mouth to take a deep breath, but he begins to sob, the hand wielding his scythe dropping so the blade sinks into the snow around his feet. The other hand comes up to cover his mouth.

Fresh tears, hot and almost painful in the cold, roll down his face.

He feels so *small* .

Chapter End Notes

rather pleased with this one lads. blame any weirdness you find on it being 2am as i write this.

mwah i love you very much everyone.

now i will sleep. snzz

this chaos, this calamity

Chapter Notes

does a funky little dance

new chapter!!! new chapter!!!

sorry for the small break i took!!! i had a big chronic pain flare up and some family stuff that im still kinda dealing with now so writing.... big hard. but this chapter is a lot of fun and i hope you like it!!!

warning for lots of past abuse (of several kinds, along with a vague reference to sexual abuse) violence, blood, things of that nature.

title from wine red by the hush sound

Tommy lays on his stomach in bed, head turned to stare at the wall.

The curtains are open on one side, and he can see the sky outside, bright with stars and the half moon.

Everyone else is asleep, save him and Ranboo. Wilbur is sleeping in the living room, until they can build a room for him. Techno went to bed early, looking exhausted. Niki cleaned up the kitchen before she went home, giving them both a kiss on the cheek and wishing him happy birthday once more. Phil was the last to go to bed, offering them a quiet goodnight only about half an hour ago.

Ranboo is sitting on his bed, writing in his memory book. The scratch of his pen and the movement of his hand on the paper are really the only sounds in the quiet house.

Tommy turns on his side, still facing the wall and the window. "We went to L'manberg."

The scratching sounds pause. "...oh," Ranboo says quietly, barely more than a breath. "How did that... go?"

He runs his fingers absentmindedly over the fabric of his blankets. "We ran into Dream. And Tubbo threatened me with a knife."

It gets very quiet for a moment.

"It didn't go well," he says redundantly.

"Yeah, it doesn't sound like it," his tone is hard to pin down. "I'm sorry."

He tugs at a loose thread on one of his blankets. "I didn't... I thought that Tubbo would be happy to see me. It's been so long." He wraps his arms around himself. "But he was drunk and angry and-- and he kept saying that I faked my death. And he wouldn't listen to me when I said I didn't."

Ranboo starts writing again, slower now. "I didn't realize that was his... story, about your 'death'," his voice is soft, "But that makes sense. He-- he's kind of irrational, sometimes. He just gets so convinced he's right, and no one... no one can really talk him out of it."

Tommy turns onto his back, shifting just enough so he doesn't crush his wings. "He wasn't like that before," he mumbles. "He was so nice before... everything. All of this. It's all changed him."

That's true, unfortunately.

When they were younger, Tubbo was so kind. He was sweet, caring, the one who did his best to be nice to everyone.

Everything began to fall apart when Schlatt and Tubbo moved in.

It was... fine, at first. The honeymoon phase, Techno had called it. They were all happy, but especially Wilbur, who felt some sense of security with another adult in the house to help him with all that he had to do.

And then Schlatt started drinking, and Wilbur began to join him more nights than not.

That was already after Wilbur started getting violent, on occasion. Nothing too outrageous, really; he slapped Techno a few times, which led to him getting very quiet and leaving the house often, taking Tommy and occasionally Tubbo with, when he could.

And Wilbur burnt Tommy with a cigarette, once. Before he even really had a reason.

(He can't even remember what he did.)

The drinking led to more abuse than he thinks he was aware of. It wasn't subtle; Wilbur would often have bruises around his arms or over his eyes or on his neck. There would be cuts on his hands or knees.

On particularly bad nights, Techno would have to sequester him and Tubbo in his room, the farthest from the room the older men shared.

Sometimes, they would hear... *things*. He doesn't want to think about what *exactly* he heard, those late nights.

("Can we listen to music or something?" Tommy asked weakly. "Techno?")

Techno was curled up next to him on the bed, hands over his ears, knees against his chest. He wondered if he could hear more than he was letting on.

"Techno?" He repeated, tapping his arm.

He jolted, glancing over at him. His eyes looked wide and surprised. "...yeah, you can play music," he said, his voice oddly flat. "The-- uh. Record player's in my closet, and my records are... in the bottom drawer of my dresser."

He nodded in acknowledgement.

Tubbo was sitting by the window and watching the stars, obviously ignoring what little they could hear from there. His fluffy tail occasionally twitched in annoyance.

"Do you want to pick what we listen to?" Tommy asked, coming over to the window with him.

"Huh? Oh, yeah," he turns away from the window. "Let's pick something."

They quietly sat on the floor next to Techno's record player, painted a matte black and covered in stickers, and listened to soft music.

By the time they both fell asleep, Techno was still sitting on the bed with his ears covered, looking shocked.)

Slowly but surely, Tubbo lost some of his kindness. He was still nice, but there was an undercurrent of discontent and annoyance with many things.

And then... he moved away. Tommy still isn't sure what happened to him, in the year and a half they were separated and could only talk on long, long calls. He was with Schlatt for part of it, but... there has to be more.

And then they were together again at fifteen. He remembers clear as day when they met again; Tubbo had practically squealed when he saw him, and he had about two seconds to brace himself before his arms were occupied with a laughing, excited sheep hybrid.

It's not like he was unhappy about it. In fact, he had hugged him back as tightly as he could, burying his face in his hair. He couldn't help it; he was so happy to see him again.

Then... this server. L'manberg. It all turned into a constant, alarming mess. It's almost too much to think about, even now.

All the fighting. All the *hurt* .

Tubbo's execution.

Techno spawning withers, looking more crazed than he's ever been.

And-- and...

Wilbur's death.

He and Tubbo had held each other tightly through the small funeral. Their hands hadn't separated for hours.

(He had stared down at Wilbur's corpse with blank eyes, unable to process what had *happened* .

He was dead, but that couldn't be true.

Wilbur could be cruel and hurtful and manipulative and mad, but-- but he still loved him, of course. Because he was his big brother, the only person who had *always* been on his side.

If he was dead, that meant he *lost that* .)

And they fought, over something that Tommy can't even remember now, and he had-- he had reached forward and grabbed his shoulder, hard, and Tubbo had looked so *betrayed* . Of course he did.

And then...

And then he got himself exiled. Because he was grieving and exhausted and reckless, because he wanted to *feel* something and it's so easy to do that when you're destroying things.

He runs his hand through his hair in the present and scratches the back of his neck. His eyes don't leave the ceiling.

"I'm sorry," Ranboo murmurs. When Tommy glances over at him, he's looking back at him with soft sympathy in his gaze, his face only illuminated by the lantern on their bedside table. "I really am. I can't imagine..." he trails off, tone uncertain.

He scratches his cheek. "It's... it's awful," he says, feeling a dull shame at how his voice cracks. "I miss him. Is it stupid that I miss him?"

"I don't think it's stupid," he replies. "I... I think I get it. I kind of... miss some people, from earlier in my life."

He sighs. "I wish none of this happened."

Ranboo doesn't say anything for a long moment. He can hear him close his book and set it and his pen on the nightstand.

"...is it selfish if I say I don't?" he asks softly. "We... well. We wouldn't have *met* if all of this didn't happen."

His bedframe squeaks as he lays down.

Tommy sighs softly. "No, I don't think that's selfish. I'm glad I met you. It's just..."

I wish it wasn't at the cost of my best friend, my big brother, almost all of my friendships...

Things keep moving on, despite their new situation.

Things are much... quieter. No one seems to want to talk about things.

Both of the kids keep their heads down. Niki is usually either in her own home or doing something outside. Phil is quieter than usual, and spends most of his time either reading or outside.

Techno tries to stay outside, as well.

As the resurrection seems to process in Wilbur's mind, he starts showing his aggression about it.

"So," he starts stiffly one morning, while the kids are eating breakfast and Techno is finishing off his coffee. "What have I missed? While I was dead." It's the most he's engaged with any of them, beyond occasional petty remarks.

Techno raises his brows and sips his drink. "Well, I don't know about what's happenin' in L'manberg or any of the other countries. I've been out here since everythin' went... *downhill* ." He tactfully doesn't mention that he had a hand in that downhill slide— he's fairly sure Wilbur is ignorant to the wither situation, and he's going to keep it that way, mostly out of a desire not to piss him off. "But... Tommy got exiled, and ran away. That's why he's here now."

Tommy pauses in eating to glance over at him, frowning. Techno shakes his head a little; he's not giving details. The slightest bit of relief registers on his face.

Wilbur stirs his own coffee, staring at the steam curling up from the mug. "What did you get exiled for, Tommy?" His voice is unusually cool.

Tommy looks down at his now empty plate and fiddles with his fork. "I did dumb shit, and pissed a bunch of people off. Tubbo thought it was a good idea..."

"So he's still in charge," Wilbur guesses. "How's he doing with that?"

Ranboo makes a noise of either anger or panic, incredibly reminiscent of an actual enderman. Instinctively, Techno's hand goes to his belt; he's not even wearing it right now, nor does he have his sword.

Tommy audibly swallows and gets up. He takes his plate to the sink and rinses it.

Tense silence settles, as usual.

Wilbur raises his brows and holds his coffee cup in both hands, one finger impatiently tapping on the ceramic. The action makes the fur on Techno's tail raise, all too familiar as a sign of irritation. "No one is going to answer me?" He asks, tone dangerous.

Ranboo keeps making scared noises, raising a hand to touch the scars down his cheek.

Tommy walks off to his room and slams the door behind him.

Techno takes the last drink of his coffee. “Well, he banished his best friend, tried to execute me, and blinded Ranboo. Take a *guess* on how he’s handlin’ it, Wilbur.” He rinses his cup out in the sink, and puts it down with a clatter. “I’m goin’ to get dressed and go outside. *You* can finish cleanin’ up the kitchen.”

He doesn’t say anything in response, simply looking at him with a cool disapproval in his eyes. He stares back at him, physically biting his tongue.

His eyes are wrong. They’ve been wrong ever since he was brought back, and he noticed it quickly; they’re a shade too light, the former deep brown replaced by something just a *bit* lighter.

When added to everything else-- the streaks of gold in his hair, the new scatter of equally golden freckles across his nose, the fresh scar on his chest-- he just doesn’t look like himself.

Maybe they didn’t bring *him* back.

Maybe he’s not himself.

Maybe they brought back something *different* entirely.

Techno tilts his head slightly, and glances at the sink full of dishes. “Might want to get to work on that,” he says flatly, and turns to leave the room.

He can feel Wilbur’s eyes on his back as he climbs up into the loft.

He gets his clothes out, setting them out on his bed, but instead of putting them on, he sits down next to them and stares at the floor for a few minutes.

He somehow forgot how... on *edge* being around Wilbur makes him.

It was like that when they were both very young. It mellowed out when they were older.

And then after Phil left... it just kept getting *worse*. His anxiety spiked, he was constantly jumpy, and he could barely sleep.

And for the past week, that’s been happening again. He’s spent every night laying in bed, completely awake, staring at the ceiling, thinking too much.

It activated a buried fear in him. Fear for Tommy, fear that Wilbur will get just a bit too annoyed with him and...

He never did that, before. Never hit him, at least. Damage was done, but it wasn’t through the same way damage was done to him.

The worst he ever did was... well, put a cigarette out on his arm. Which was *bad*, but not as *damaging* in the long term as constant pain by his own hands.

(Techno could hear the definitive crack of his glasses’ frames as Wilbur’s hand connected with his cheek.

He gasped in pain and stumbled back, hand coming up to his face. The left lens of his glasses was shattered in a spiderweb pattern, and he could barely see.

“Go to your room,” Wilbur spat.

He took his glasses off with a shaky hand and looked at the broken remains of them. Completely broken, with the sturdy frame cracked above the left lens and arm. Bits of glass sparkled as they fell from it.

“Don’t make me repeat myself.”

He nodded jerkily and stumbled to his room.)

Techno rubs his face, looking up at the ceiling for a long moment.

Something is so, so wrong. Of course it is; he knew from the moment it was brought up that the resurrection was *wrong* .

Undead things exist in a horrible limbo, trapped between worlds. And that’s what he is now, if not physically then in some sort of spiritual sense.

Like zombies are driven to crave living flesh, or wither skeletons are driven to turn everything they find into their own image... Wilbur is going to be driven to do *something* .

He’s angry-- perhaps even angrier than he was when he died-- and he’s never shown his anger in a healthy way.

He stands up to get dressed, trying to fight down the memories.

He’s past this. He’s been away from that situation for... *years* , now. He doesn’t need to be *scared* .

Wilbur holds no power, here. It’s *his* damn house, and he’s staying because of *his* kindness.

If all of that... if all of that starts again?

He won’t hesitate to turn him out into the snow.

(In theory, at least.)

He dresses himself with no more consideration for his feelings or thoughts or memories.

There’s a little, nagging idea at the back of his mind. An idea he has pondered for days now.

He could... definitely distract himself by finding whatever figure has been lurking in the woods. He’s sure he could find whoever it is. He saw them this very morning, less than an hour ago...

He needs a distraction.

If it's Dream... he can handle that confrontation. He can handle that fight, or that conversation.

But if it's someone else...

He can handle that too, actually. He's completely capable, even with his still sore and healing ribs. Again, he's fought with broken ribs before.

And who knows? Maybe a good fight is exactly what he needs right now. Violence has always helped him feel more in control.

He braids his hair as neatly as he can and coils it into a bun at the base of his head, pinning it up secure and out of the way.

It's all too familiar when he pulls on his armor, adjusting it carefully, and picks up his sword. He's concerned about perhaps being barred from his plans by his family, so he makes a note to grab his pickaxe from the basement. He hops down to the lower floor.

Ranboo has left the kitchen, instead sitting under the window with both the cats on his lap and petting them gently. His ears are down and his tail is nervously flicking.

Wilbur is irritably doing the dishes. Ceramic and silverware clatter together.

Brat .

He dips into the basement to pick up his pickaxe, and climbs back up quickly. He's antsy, now. The voices murmur their interest.

"I'll be back inside in a bit," he calls as he walks to the front door. No one responds, but that's fine.

He locks his eyes on the treeline where he's seen the lurking figure. He doesn't let himself stray from a straight path there.

The snow crunches under his boots as he walks towards the trees. It doesn't take long for him to walk between two thick trees.

The needles above create a dark canopy. The light spring sunlight is barely enough to light the way. Luckily, he's fairly good at seeing in the dark.

His ears perk as he walks deeper into the trees. The forest on this side is far bigger than anywhere else, so it would be an ideal place to hide.

He stalks through the darkened trees, alert.

The familiar trickle of adrenaline and tension crackles through his body, invigorating his long-resting muscles. He can feel his posture straightening regardless of the simmering ache in his ribs, all the fur along his body raising, his hand tightening around the grip of his sword.

This feels right. It's shaking loose that buried instinct, the battle skills.

There are footprints in the soft earth. Too small to be his own, yet too big to be Niki or Phil, and they're the only ones who venture out here. So...

Broken branches, lower on the trees. A scrap of torn fabric, black in color, along with a loose button, also black. It's too nondescript to be of any help in identifying his new stalker.

His own footsteps are as quiet as they can be. He's creeping through the brush, now, eyes wide and alert, his tail flicking and twitching with rising agitation, his ears perked and attuned to any noises.

And then he sees it.

Feathers .

Golden feathers, standing out oh so starkly against the dark ground. Not a lot of them, but enough to be seen.

And they're not Wilbur's new feathers, nor Niki's white-gold ones. The shade is *pure* gold, brighter and cleaner than some of his own treasure.

His upper lip raises in a mean snarl, and he can feel himself grin.

Quackity, huh? Interesting. Why would he be there? Why would he be watching them? And it's been a while, too. Over a month now.

So why is he watching? What does he want?

He draws his sword as he ventures deeper into the trees.

"Where are you hidin', Quackity?" he asks in a soft voice, not much louder than a whisper. "Come out and face me."

For a moment, his only response is the wind rushing through the trees and the scurry of small animals in the brush.

And then he hears footsteps.

His grin widens. They're coming from the left and behind him, so they're going away from him.

He's scared.

Techno begins to run, deftly dodging the trees, following the footsteps. There's something hysterically excited boiling in his mind. The voices are praising him, incoherent but excited. (They've never been fond of Quackity.)

Through the gap between two trees, he can see the gold flash of his wings. He can hear his harsh breathing.

They're coming up on the house, actually. Hm.

Why would he be going that way?

He keeps running, avoiding any obstacles easily. He can see his wings fluttering, the bouncing of his head, the small flash of an axe's blade, as he runs.

His grin turns into an outright snarl as he readies his sword. He's not going to kill him, no. He's not going to kill anyone anymore, save maybe Dream.

But he *is* going to ask him what the hell he's doing out here.

They're getting to the sparser areas at the edges of the wood.

As soon as they're out of the thicker trees, he's able to overtake Quackity.

They both end up tumbling into the snow. Techno's sword is pressed against the avian's neck, his knee pressed to his side, kneeling over him.

Quackity's eyes are wide and alarmed, staring up at him, but the rest of his expression is simply twisted in rage.

"So," Techno starts in a harsh, cruelly amused voice. "Mind tellin' me why you're out here stalkin' me?"

His eyes narrow and he can feel his hand move to grab for his axe. "Trying to finish what I started months ago," he spits. "You can't just *dodge death*, Technoblade."

His grin returns, and he presses the sword in a bit closer, so close to drawing blood. The voices raise in response to the idea, and he licks his lips unconsciously. "I can, and I did. Accept it and leave me alone."

In response, Quackity spits in his face. Honestly, he respects the audacity of it.

It doesn't mean he's not going to kick his ass, but he respects it.

He rises on one foot and one knee to steady himself, to get up to his feet.

Before he can, Quackity jerks upwards, throwing one hand up to grab his sword from his own grip, and using the other to strike him in the temple.

Techno gives him a bit of credit there, too-- it works. He ends up completely unbalanced, and falls back into the snow, vision blurry with reflexive tears and his head pounding. His helmet scatters away, on the crust of the snow. The fall jarred his ribs, as well-- he can hardly breathe for the steady waves of pain.

Quackity scrambles to his feet, face in a completely manic grin. He has *his* sword in one hand, and his own axe in the other.

He snarls weakly, barely able to see. That was a well executed hit, and he's a little offended by it. He respects a good fighter, but the idea that *Quackity* of all people is a good fighter is just wrong.

"Y'know, I kind of *expected* you to pull some kind of trick, Techno," he says, stepping forwards to rest his foot on his chest. He resists the urge to groan in pain as he pushes *right* on his healing ribs. "Sure, I hoped you wouldn't. I hoped you'd accept the fact that you *deserved the fucking execution* and let yourself die. But I was ready for you to do something reckless, like *use a totem of undying* ." He raises his axe casually. "I knew we should have searched you. But Fundy and Ranboo weren't exactly comfortable with the idea, and we were pushing our limits already."

He pauses purposefully, leaning in further. Techno bites his tongue hard enough to taste blood as he *feels* his ribs shift. "How *is* Ranboo doing, by the way? I noticed you were harboring him. And *Niki* , too. You've got a pretty good band of outlaws out here. You're a terrorist, your father murdered his own son, Tommy violated the terms of his exile, Ranboo's a traitor, and Niki... she helped that traitor escape proper punishment. And Wilbur? Well, what *hasn't* he done wrong? Even bringing him back is a crime, I'm sure. Which I know you're *well* aware of."

He bares his teeth and moves a hand to grip his ankle, but the waves of pain make it... difficult for him to grip *anything* . (He's not as sharp as he should be. *Shame* crawls up his spine.) "We're not doin' *anythin'* to bother you or your companions," he spits. "We're quietly livin' our lives. Leave us alone."

Quackity puts on a false smile, thin as paper. "Listen, Technoblade. I respect you, I really do. But you're a walking, breathing danger, to all of us, to whatever we try to build and live in. You've destroyed so many things, killed so many people, for the *fun* of it. And I know you've claimed that you're retired, but judging by how you just *attacked* me... well, forgive me if I don't believe it." He lifts his axe again, using it to tilt Techno's head up briefly.

He swallows thickly. His vision is still blurry with pain, only getting worse as he keeps his foot on his chest. He can hardly draw a full breath, but when he manages to get enough air to speak, he says; "I attacked you because you've been stalkin' me and scarin' the *hell* out of my younger brothers." He grits his teeth and curls his hands into fists on the snow. "I'm perfectly willin' to let you go. We can be completely civil about this. But if you keep tryin' to *intimidate* me..."

He raises an eyebrow, still smiling thinly, and pushes his axe in further. The keen edge of the blade knicks his skin, and he's hyperaware of the heat of his own blood.

The voices had been murmuring this entire time, interested and delighted by the thrill of the small chase and of potential violence, but at the first draw of blood, they begin to *scream* , still very incoherent but incredibly loud.

"See, Techno. I don't believe a word you say, so no, we can't really be *civil* about this," Quackity tilts his head to the side and withdraws his axe, raising it to admire the red blood on it's edge. It flashes in the dim light. "I'm going to kill you, like you *deserve* . And then I have a bit of a *score* to settle with Niki. And then, *sure* , I'll leave your family of criminals alone."

For some reason, the threat towards Niki makes the voices clear up.

KILL HIM

PROTECT NIKI

PART OF YOUR PACK

DEFEND HER

KILL HIM

Techno bares his teeth again, and suddenly, he can hardly feel the pain of the edges of his broken ribs digging into his insides. The blurriness in his vision disappears.

He's not actually aware of it, but he must knock Quackity off of him. Because when he's next able to focus, they're facing off with each other.

He's not technically armed-- Quackity has his sword-- but he can fight hand-to-hand, if he must.

He can hear the blood rushing in his ears. The voices are *screaming* now, demanding he protect Niki, that he needs to kill Quackity, *now*.

Roughly, the avian throws his sword into the snow, well out of his reach. He takes his axe's handle in both hands and wields it, a mean grin on his face. "Come on, I'll give you a chance to fight back. You're in pain, you're weak, you're unarmed. I'll give you a chance."

Techno grits his teeth. "I could tear you to fuckin' pieces if I wanted to, Quackity. But I don't. Stop pickin' fights that you can't win."

Quackity huffs, still looking delighted. "And you're *bluffing*, Technoblade. Come on, try it; I want you to. Maybe try and attack me like a wild animal, like you tried before?" He laughs, cruel. "Because you don't have any *weapons*."

Oh, I don't?

He steadies himself on the snow, boots digging into the ground.

Lifting his arms is hard, with the hot, digging pain in half of his ribcage, and it's so difficult for him to focus.

But he's fought through pain of all kinds before; this isn't too hard.

Moving roughly, to fight through the pain, he reaches up and wraps his hands around the handle of his pickaxe. He pulls it off his back, ignoring how his body protests.

"Y'know, you really should have searched me," he says, words practically flying from his mouth. "'Cause I don't need a proper weapon to kill you."

He watches with a delirious kind of joy as Quackity's deep brown eyes widen with alarm, following the arc of his pickaxe as he brings it in front of him. For a moment, the netherite head flashes like lightning in the white sunlight.

He steps forward with all the confidence he can, grinning. The expression of delight on his face is crumbling slowly, his smile twitching and fading as he realizes what's going on.

"I have a pickaxe, and I'll put it through your teeth, Quackity. *Through your teeth*."

Techno gets just a bit closer, within striking distance.

He draws the tool back, feeling a strange level of joy about the waves of hot pain through his broken ribs, and prepares to attack.

The sound it makes when he swings it into the younger man's open mouth, cutting through his cheek, through his upper jaw, and through the rest of his head to come out just above his eye, is surprisingly dry.

There's no scream. He wouldn't be surprised if the shock and the injury didn't immediately kill him.

He withdraws the tool and steadies it in his shaking hands.

Quackity goes down on the snow quickly, landing on his side, blood pouring from his face. All the blood vessels in the affected eye are blown and the pupil is narrow, but the other eye is still wide and alert, darting around in a panic.

Techno stares down at him. The voices are screaming in his ears, delighted by the blood and the vindication. But beyond their jubilation, he feels oddly hollow. It feels good to get rid of someone who's been stalking them, but there's a part of him that's... disappointed, in himself.

His opponent tries to rise up into a sitting position. Blood pours from his open mouth, and he has several teeth missing where the pickaxe struck him. His unhurt eye locks on him and stares with wild, feral anger. Red lines drip down his face where the head of the tool had emerged above his eye, below his browbone.

He tries to speak, but the blood and the fact that his mouth is so injured just makes it come out unintelligible. He has to spit blood and what must be a tooth into the snow.

But his hand still reaches for his axe, uncoordinated and jerky.

Instinct and pity, not blind rage, drive Techno to take his improvised weapon and bury it in Quackity's chest.

He draws in one, stilted attempt at breath, and then falls back to the snow, blood beginning to pool around him and steam on the snow.

Techno withdraws the weapon again and brings it close, wrapping his hands around the polished wooden handle more for the comfort of it than anything.

Good job! the voices praise loudly.

He nods woodenly in response. There's blood splattered across his face, his chest, in his hair.

Quackity lays, dead and silent, for a few minutes, until he disappears in a roll of smoke. A few items replace him on the snow, and they lay among the mess of blood.

He leaves them there, and walks back to the house.

A vow of nonviolence. A promise not to kill.

So much for that.

--

Wilbur irritably scrubs at the dishes in the sink.

He remembers something now, about Techno, something that didn't much come up the last time they were together; he carries himself with so much fucking *confidence*. And it's irritating. He's done very little to deserve that pride, if you don't count causing chaos and illegal actions and having a lack of a proper moral compass.

He grits his teeth and continues washing the dishes. He doesn't want to, of course, but he's well aware that their situation isn't ideal. He wouldn't put it past Techno to kick him out, and Phil would likely be on his side.

Because he always is.

He can see Tommy creep from his bedroom out of the corner of his eye. He looks so much different than he did months ago. His last clear memory of his youngest brother is him tired but not beaten down, hurt but not broken, just... more like the kid he practically raised.

But now... the traces of Wilbur's own influence seem to be all but erased.

The way he wears his hair long now, nearly touching his shoulders. The new scars on his face. Traces of emeralds and gold in the jewelry he wears. The new edge to his smile, shyer and more closed off. The way he jumps when spoken to...

The confident teenager he knew not all that long ago is replaced by someone nervous and jittery and generally different, and he hates it.

He doesn't know what happened, yet. He was exiled, Techno said. And that lead to him running away, to him coming out to this barren, cold wasteland where only Technoblade could build a home and be *happy* with it. But what was in the *middle*? What took up that blank space between whatever he did to earn that punishment and needing to come out here?

Tommy walks to the kitchen table and gathers up a few dishes, carrying them over to set them in the dirty side of the sink carefully. "Here's a few more," he says, his voice odd and without much warmth. "Thank you for doing them."

Wilbur scrubs harder at the pan he's working on. It's not necessary, but he's a little bit pleased by how Tommy flinches. "You're welcome. Would you mind helping me?"

He steps away from him, not far, just a step or two. "I have to do the laundry." His voice is still... colorless, maybe, is a good descriptor. "You can do the dishes. You'll be fine." He turns away, posture tense and guarded, and walks away to gather up clothes that need washing.

He continues to wash dishes, now not caring when metal and glass and ceramic crack together and make a terrible sound. He isn't even putting much attention into actually getting them clean; he's just putting attention into letting his displeasure show.

Techno went outside, for god knows what. Phil left early, to go hunting now that the snow is lessened. Niki is in her own home.

Ranboo-- the enderman kid who Tommy seems attached to-- is sitting in the living room with the cats. (Since when did Techno allow either random, irrelevant children or animals in his home? Wouldn't it make more sense for him to block them out?)

(The other night, while he was preening his wings for the first time in well over half a year, Phil had sat next to him and talked to him about some of what had happened, since he died.

Tommy was exiled, which he already knew. Techno was executed-- he hadn't been amused when Wilbur huffed "good riddance". Niki and Ranboo had to move out here because they were fleeing some kind of punishment in L'manberg. Phil himself had to leave to help Techno care for Tommy, who apparently spent plenty of time sick and injured.

"All of you seem to have been enjoying yourselves out here," Wilbur replied blandly.

"We're doing our best," Phil said, resting a hand on his back. He had jerked away from it, and he withdrew it completely. "We put a lot into bringing you back, Wil. I know it's a lot, but--"

"You don't know," he spat. "And you never will. Leave me alone."

He did. He felt hollow when he realized that he didn't fight to stay.)

Tommy carries a basket to the fireplace, and uses an improvised clothesline to hang up the damp clothing. He moves with confidence and sureness, like he knows what he's doing and enjoys it.

Tommy hated chores, when he was younger. Phil had to bribe him most of the time to just get him to clean his room. But now, he seems... happy, to clean up by himself.

The idea that his younger brother has been growing and changing without him, and maybe because he's without him, hurts deeply.

Wilbur rinses off the last dish and shuts off the tap. He roughly dries his hands on a faintly stained hand towel and then throws it back onto the counter.

The whole situation is so stupidly domestic. They all have their assigned house chores and Techno spends a great deal of time reading by the fire and Phil sings to himself as he cooks dinner or rearranges the bookshelf and Niki bakes cakes and Ranboo writes in a leatherbound

book and Tommy does laundry and smiles more than he ever did when Wilbur was his main caretaker--

The front door opens and Techno walks inside. He's splattered with blood, stark against his pale skin and light hair and the white of his shirt underneath his armor. His expression is almost entirely blank, and his posture is tense. Blood drips from his pickaxe, but not his sword, both clutched in his hands.

The cats both let out alarmed mewls and one of them, the smaller one, darts to hide under the couch. Tommy drops a few clothespins.

Wilbur stares. An odd, blurry horror clutches at the back of his mind for a minute, like its trying to unbury a memory.

Techno coming through the front door with blood on his face and a blank, empty expression...

"What happened?" Tommy asks, very carefully controlled panic in his voice.

"Found out who's been stalkin' us," Techno says blankly, hanging up his sword. "It was Quackity. He wanted to get revenge."

"Ah," Tommy replies, crouching to pick up his clothespins. "Are you... okay?"

He nods. "Yeah. Probably messed up my ribs a little, but... fine otherwise." He pulls off his boots. "I'm gonna go... take a shower."

"Good." Tommy goes back to hanging up laundry.

Wilbur tries to make sense of the situation. He hadn't heard a moment of the confrontation, but Techno obviously just-- killed someone, and *ruthlessly*, judging by the fact that he used his pick and not a sword.

And stalking them...? Quackity, really? What is he even talking about?

Has he been excluded from this conversation? Why? He lives here too.

Wilbur grits his teeth and growls quietly under his breath.

Techno, halfway to the ladder into the loft, freezes entirely and stares over at him. Tommy begins humming loudly as he puts up laundry. He can hear Ranboo making small enderman noises as he pets one of the cats.

"I was under the impression that you've changed, out here," he says, and his voice sounds even and haunted to his own ears. "I guess I was wrong."

Techno blinks aggressively. He expects him to pursue the argument, because Techno has always enjoyed arguing.

Instead, he gives a jerky shake of his head and climbs the ladder, the clatter of the trapdoor alarmingly abrupt in the quiet house.

Wilbur goes to look out the window.

The blood looks stark against the pale white snow.

can't we find something else to pretend?

Chapter Notes

does a gay little dance

hi everyone! i apologize for not. posting a new chapter in a While. long story short, im still in a chronic pain flare up (that might just be how i feel normally now?? who knows) and writing is Big Slow when im like that pfff. but!!! i have a chapter!!! and maybe a few more soon?? (no double update this time though lol, that is Too Much for pain brain)

this is a big ol chapter full of big ol things. it sets up... conflicts. future events. etc.

big warnings too though!

(mostly past) abuse, of many forms, references to violence, references to sexual assault, victim-blaming, a touch of fantastical discrimination, and references to amputation. i think that's everything lol. big warnings this time. Large Warnings.

also the timeline is kind of wonky and yknow what we're leaving it that way.

chapter title from call them brothers by regina spektor

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The shower water is very warm as it runs over Techno's body. It loosens his tense, pained muscles, and washes the splatters of blood from his skin.

He's having a hard time focusing on his shower.

The voices aren't speaking right now. They faded off a bit ago, which is worrying.

Because there's *still* a noise in his head. A disturbing... *rumble* , almost, like distant thunder, like the wind blowing harshly through trees. His thoughts are muddled with it, it's hard to even focus on washing his own body.

It started after he got inside the house. After he grabbed fresh clothing and put up his armor and sword and pickaxe.

After he turned on the shower and stared at himself in the mirror for a few minutes.

He wishes he couldn't recognize the person in his reflection. He wishes the tired purple eyes and withering scars and bitten lips and messy pink hair weren't so familiar.

(He should have grown out of hating his appearance, by now. He's twenty-one years old, for fucks sake.

It's a different *kind* of hate now, at least.)

He was trying to change. There's tangible evidence of that, really; his family being held close, how he hung up his weapons and only used them to temper the urges of the voices, this cozy little home he's built for himself.

But when given *any* problem at all, with *any* sort of external pressure, he turned back to violence. It isn't just what he did to Quackity, either; it's about his immediate reaction to Dream's presence in his home, both times, had been to promise the voices his *blood*.

How he spent a considerable part of that insufferable arrest fantasizing about killing the little party that captured him, even Ranboo. (Even Fundy, which was-- which meant *something*. Probably.)

He manages to get soap on his hair, and he starts combing it, untangling the strands that had gotten loose and messy during the fight.

That's when there's a voice he didn't think he'd hear again fills his mind.

That was not what you promised me.

Techno opens his eyes and stares at the shower wall. He works the comb through a small tangle. "Never said it was," he replies quietly.

This is true. When will I receive my tribute, Technoblade?

He winces at the sound of his name in their voice. "Soon, I think. I don't know if you're aware, but things are complicated out here."

Yes, the resurrection of your fallen brother. I was wondering if you would try to help.

He scrunches up his nose and shakes his head. "It wouldn't work, would it?"

No. But your father wouldn't have known that.

"He's fairly intelligent. He knows a lot about magic."

A remarkable man. I almost wish he was my servant instead of you.

Unlike the voices, he can feel emotions from the deity communicating with him. It's been years since they spoke to him directly, barring the odd dream where he's not sure if it was just his imagination or an actual appearance from the god.

(There are only a few details he's ever been able to parse; blood-red eyes with streaming tears of the same color, torn and batlike wings, and the flash of twisting, black horns.)

Their voice is somewhat rough, though not to the point of sounding harsh. The sound of it in his head is clear, though there's the edge of that *rumble* under their voice. They have the faintest hint of an accent, though he can't place it.

And their moods come through *very* clearly, as if he's feeling them himself. Right now, they're amused, if a bit annoyed.

"With all due respect, I don't think he would have been as receptive to it as I've been," he tells them, tilting his head back into the shower spray to rinse his hair.

I suppose. I received you when you were young and vulnerable... they trail off, before letting out a musical, somewhat cruel laugh. ***Ah, I can only fantasize about what that would have been like.***

He frowns and runs his hands through his hair, running the tips of his fingers over his scalp. "Why are you communicatin' with me?" he asks, closing his eyes. "You haven't done that in... at least a few years now."

(He remembers. He had just killed someone, a mercenary from a town full of people he wronged. He was... eighteen, then. Maybe a bit younger.

It was the most vicious he had ever been, up to that point; he had used his sword to cut the man's mouth clean open from ear to ear. He plunged it through his stomach three times, and then into his chest at least a dozen.

By the time he was done, the man was largely just a pile of flesh and bone and organs and blood on the forest floor. There were already bugs beginning to climb atop the gore.

He stood, staring at the corpse, tasting blood on his lips and feeling it soak into his clothing.

That was very impressive, that rough, amused voice had praised him. ***You should do that more often.)***

You drew my attention when you killed that poor little duckling, they murmur with amusement. ***You haven't given me a tribute in a while. I was curious.***

He scratches at his head, claws lightly pressing into his scalp. "Don't know if your horde of spirits has informed you, but I'm retired. No more violence." It tastes bitter and flat in his mouth; the metallic tang of a bloody lie coats his tongue.

He can feel a wave of disappointment. It chokes him, suddenly; the cloying feeling of an immortal being's disdain. Mixed with his own issues with disappointment, it's not pleasant. He has to brace a hand on the wall so he doesn't fall, that's how strong it is.

You cannot refuse to serve me, the god says with disgust. ***You signed away your right to non-violence when you became my vessel, Technoblade.***

He grits his teeth and leans out of the shower spray. The rage flowing through the blood god's connection to him makes him feel like he can't breathe, makes him feel angry and edgy and like he could break the house itself to pieces.

“I didn’t sign away my right to *anything*,” he spits. The rage flares and he ignores the flinch it causes him. “I didn’t want this, and you *know* it. My blood was used against my will.”

Binding blood is still binding blood when spilled on my altar, they counter. You should have thought of that before you let that boy drag you into my temple.

The reminder of Dream only makes him angrier. He shuts off the shower and gets out, drying himself off roughly even as his sore body protests. “How was I supposed to know he was goin’ to stab me in the back?” He says bitterly. “I was a *kid*. I didn’t even know you existed.”

You hardly seemed to be a child when you slashed your dear friend’s face and chest open. Or when he fucked you on my altar. Your whorish behavior and merciless nature was why I chose to take the offering.

His face feels cold, suddenly. His stomach twists with disgust at the memory, purposefully buried below the sands of time, being blown away by the deity’s words. He doesn’t want to think about it. He *can’t* think about it.

He rests his hands on the edge of the sink and holds tightly to keep any sense of stability. “I was *fifteen*. He-- he... *assaulted* me. I wasn’t a whore, nor am I now.” His voice trembles with a childlike level of indignation.

That’s a pity, they drawl, you would be so wonderful at it. Maybe you’d be better as a whore than my vessel. You’re pretty enough.

He grits his teeth so hard it hurts. “Get out of my head.” There’s no respect for his patron now, just a simmering hatred.

Do you dislike the reminder of your past mistakes? They ask with what would sound almost like sincerity, if not for the caustic, acidic amusement dripping from their words. ***Of how you trusted a boy who was more rotten than the most spoiled fruit?***

He jerks back from the counter and starts pulling on his clothes. “Get out,” he repeats angrily. “I’d rather have the voices screaming at me.” *At least they all show some level of compassion.*

Mortals take these things so seriously, the god sighs. Betrayal, rape, murder, bloodshed. For immortals they mean little. Ask your father, he would know.

His stomach twists at the implication that Phil would take *any* of those topics lightly.

You became my connection to the mortal world, Technoblade. There’s no escaping this bond.

He digs his nails into the scar on his wrist. “Believe me, I know. I’ve looked for a way to sever it.”

I could bring you power and glory and success. I could even bring your beloved friend back to you, I’m sure. But you refuse to serve me properly. You were doing so well... the

stunt with the withers was impressive. What chaotic beasts...

He sinks down onto the bathroom rug and hugs his legs. "Leave me alone," he says, definitely childish now. "I'm in a bad enough mood."

Why are you upset about killing an annoying bird? He tried to execute you, stalked you, taunted you to your face. I felt his intentions; they were as impure as they get. You shouldn't feel remorse over killing him.

He scratches at a patch of roughness on his shin. "I don't want to kill anyone. I was changin' for the better," he murmurs. "I'm not that kind of person. At least, I wasn't before."

That's by design. I influenced your nature, Technoblade. I changed you to be a better servant. It really didn't take much, honestly. Enough of your mind is wired for hostility that it was ever so easy to push you down that path.

He stares at the wood-panelled wall. The rage is simmering down into a thick, choking sense of pure helplessness.

There's nothing like the deity you were unwillingly tied to telling you you're destined for violence.

Something you have heard time and time again since you were a *toddler*.

I'm still trying to get rid of that pesky empathy, though. I never knew that a Nether-born could be so soft-hearted. It's like every lesson the dimension taught you went in one ear and out the other... Perhaps you were too young at the time to really absorb the teachings...?

He runs his hand through his damp hair. "Please leave me alone," he says quietly. "I... I'm tired."

They scoff. ***Mortals. They kill one pest of their world and then they need to sleep. It wasn't even hard to kill him.***

"Yes it was. My ribs are still broken and it hurt." It *still* hurts. The aching throb in his chest isn't helping his mood. "Took a lot of effort..."

Where is the Technoblade who could slay a hundred men in a mere half-hour? I want that man as my vessel.

He closes his eyes. The disappointment and mockery sink into his skin like poison.

I didn't expend energy to speak to you only to have you ignore my demands. You're tied to me whether you like it or not, and you're bound to serve. If not... I don't think you want to find out, do you?

"Leave me alone," he repeats weakly. "I'll serve you. I know I don't have a choice. But I need to rest. I'm still injured."

Why are mortals so fragile? They lament. I knew I should have taken your friend instead. He's not mortal. And I don't think he would complain and feel bad about slaying thousands to fuel me.

He frowns. "Dream is mortal," he says with annoyance. "He's pure human."

He doesn't feel like a human.

His throat feels tight. "You're lying to me." Dream is a human. That was established early on in their friendship; he was even jealous of all the hybrids he knew.

Believe what you like, little vessel, the god says demurely. ***If you say he's human, I trust your judgement.*** They laugh, high and cruel. ***I suppose I'll release my hold on your mind for now. Don't make me come back and remind you of your purpose again.***

The humming rage and rumbling in his mind disappears, fading into nothing. It's almost more disturbing for him to hear the silence.

Speaking to a deity directly is-- a lot. He has a headache now. Great. He's feeling guilt and hatred and simmering disgust and his ribs are aching and his head is too.

He needs a nap, probably. He's tired. It's like they took a significant portion of his own energy to talk to him.

They probably did.

He gets up from the bathroom floor. His back protests with a crack, as do his ribs, which ache even more as he braces himself on the counter.

Ugh. He's not going to be able to sleep tonight, as sore as he is. Even his hands-- which are still recovering from making Tommy's scythe-- shake and tremble.

He looks at himself in the mirror for a moment.

Again, he wishes he didn't recognize himself.

"Pretty," he mutters to himself with disdain as he leans on close to his reflection and brushes his fingers over his cheek, down the withering scar over his eye.

"You hardly seemed to be a child when you slashed your dear friend's face and chest open. Or when he fucked you on my altar."

He *was* a child, though. Barely fifteen; it happened a few weeks after his birthday.

He was hurt and scared and... and he was a *child*. The cruelty he displayed didn't erase his youth, and that's not even counting the near-catatonic state he was in after it all.

The fact that the blood god saw that whole ordeal play out makes him feel *sick*. All of it makes him sick, really.

He was a *child*.

“Wired for hostility” they said.

He’s been told that enough that it’s probably at least a little bit true.

When was the first time...? He was very little, maybe only three or four?

He can remember it. It’s the only even slightly intelligible memory he has from before the Nether.

He was sitting on the front porch of the house, cross legged on the wooden planks. He had a few handfuls of red berries he gathered in the woods that left vibrant stains on his skin when he crushed them.

He was fascinated by the bright red color, the sweet scent of the fruits. It felt sticky on his skin, but not in a bad way. And when he ate some, they tasted good, not poisonous at all...

He doesn’t remember which of his parents came outside, or why. But he remembers someone shouting (his deadname, as far as he remembers, whatever that was) and being yanked up from the wooden floor.

He had shouted as well, but they didn’t seem to care. They dragged him inside and threw him, not into his room, but into a closet.

This part is fuzzier. They had locked the door and it was very dark in the closet. The darkness and the feeling of being trapped filled him with fear and he began to cry.

When they opened the door again, he must have looked frightening. His hands were still stained red, as was his mouth, and he was wailing.

They grabbed him off the floor of the closet and carried him to the bathroom. They put him in the bathtub and he was subjected to a very cold bath-- this he remembers well-- and then sat on the counter.

“I should have known we couldn’t trust you,” whichever parent it was said. “The minute we take our eyes off of you, you kill something... that’s really the only thing you can do.”

He had babbled that that wasn’t *true*, at *all*, but they had-- *hurt* him, he thinks they slapped him, but he can’t remember that much. But whatever they did, it made him shut up.

After that, he wasn’t allowed to go out into the woods for a while. Eventually they stopped caring, though.

At the time, he hadn’t understood their anger. He was so little that he just felt scared of the shouting and the cruel tone and the discomfort of the freezing bath. He didn’t realize what part of playing with red berries was so bad.

Now, with years of knowledge and context, he understands. His parents had seen their piglin hybrid child sitting on their porch, covered in red stains. He remembers using his claws to

break open the berries, so they were likely dripping with juice, and he had eaten a few, so it was all over his mouth.

They assumed, incorrectly and stupidly, that he had killed something.

As if a child who barely weighed more than thirty pounds could kill *anything*.

Techno wonders, sometimes, how his parents ended up with him. As far as he can recall, he was adopted, as both of them were human. Did they steal him? Find him abandoned somewhere? Or was he given to them?

He doesn't know, and there's no one alive who would.

He wonders if his birth parents were good people. Or if, like so many things in his life, they were malicious and cruel.

He likes to think they were nice people.

Before Phil found him, he'd imagine what they were like. It's something that kept him happy and sane while he was in the Nether, so alone and, perhaps more annoyingly for his six-year-old brain, *bored*.

But he'll never know, and it's pointless to wonder, anyway.

He's feeling nostalgic and negative and tired.

He needs a nap.

-

"Am I a bad person?" Techno asks abruptly.

Phil looks up from the book he was reading.

Techno looks like a weary king, sitting with his head propped on his hand, his fingers turning his crown over and over. He's been oddly quiet all day, even for him. Very lost in thought. Earlier, he had asked what was wrong, and he just shook his head.

(The obvious answer would have been having to kill Quackity. But that didn't quite feel correct.)

"Well, that's a complicated question," he says, marking the page in his book to set it aside. "Are you asking if *I* think you're a bad person? Because I don't. But I don't think that you're asking about my opinion."

Techno turns his crown over, rubbing his thumb against the ruby set in the gold. His hands are visibly shaking. "Nah, I know you don't think that." He sets the crown aside and runs a hand through his loose hair. "Plenty of people seem to think that I'm a bad enough person to deserve a violent public execution." There's a horrible kind of exhaustion in his eyes, a *familiar* kind.

Phil watches him as he moves. “I don’t think that’s ever justified.” He glances over the railing of the loft, down to the lower floor. The quiet sound of Wilbur snoring and indistinct voices from the younger boys’ room drifts up to them. “That would mean it was justified when you killed Tubbo, and it wasn’t, was it?”

He shrugs. “He hadn’t done anything bad yet. If you asked me *now*, I’d be completely willing to light him up with fireworks.” His tone is remarkably calm, despite the nervous way he’s fidgeting with his hair. The bitterness in his voice is justified, he thinks. “Did you know I spawned withers there? In L’manberg? And that was part of their justification for executin’ me.” He pauses. “I wouldn’t do that now, I don’t think. Any of that.”

He gets up from his bed and comes over to Techno’s side, sitting down next to him. “Was there more than the withers?” He asks. He’s heard things, of course. But everything he heard while living in L’manberg had a biased edge.

Techno snorts and leans his face against his hand again. “God, yeah. There was more. I... massacred a bunch of people. Which was pretty...” he waves his free hand. “Not *great*. And I killed Tubbo...” he trails off for a moment. “I didn’t *want* to.”

A parcel of silence follows the confession. Phil takes his hand and strokes the side of his palm with his thumb.

“I was completely willin’ to fight *with* them,” Techno says bitterly. “I wanted to help them be free. But that’s not what happened. They were happy, but they weren’t *free*. They... they reinstated their inherently flawed government within *hours* of winnin’ everything back. They had my help, and they *stabbed me in the back* for it.” A spasm goes through his facial muscles, starting roughly at one of his withering scars.

There’s a hurt, vulnerable quality to his voice. Despite a (perhaps *warranted*) reputation of being heartless, Techno is a well of empathy. His ruthlessness isn’t something he uses exclusively; he’s a kind person, perfectly capable of helping people if he wants to and feels it’s been earned. That’s evident in how he took in Tommy and Ranboo and Niki, without so much as thinking about asking for something in return.

Phil isn’t going to lie and pretend that Techno hasn’t done cruel, horrible things. He’s all too aware of his flaws to say that. But on the whole... he’s more than the sum of his mistakes.

(He’s very forgiving of these kinds of things. Maybe that’s a flaw for him.)

He rubs his palm again, still gentle. “I don’t exactly blame you for what you did.” The words are soft, as caring as he can make them.

His face is still twitching, as is his tail behind them. “It was *retribution*,” he mutters. “They *hurt* me, they stole from me, they used me for their own ends—“ his breathing is a little shallow as he speaks, the first two fingers on his free hand tangled around a lock of curly hair. “It was fair! I returned the favor! It was— it was *reciprocity*, Phil!” His voice is getting a little too high in his anger. “And they dropped an *anvil* on me for it. Even though I—I *realized* I was dangerous, that I didn’t need to stick around, that I needed to change myself. I left entirely, and they hunted me down.”

Phil frowns and holds his hand tighter. “I think...” he trails off for a moment, thinking hard on the topic.

When Techno was younger— around nineteen— the two of them came upon another small nation in unrest.

While they weren’t aware of Techno’s reputation quite yet (*Technoblade* wouldn’t become a known and feared name for a while, outside of select groups) they were *well* aware of the Angel of Death. A man who was said to have made it to the End and survived, a man who spent years alone and unharmed, a man who’s survived countless years without a single death.

They had explained their woes; their land and infrastructure was being taken over by a larger nation, despite the area being legally theirs with their hard work poured into it. They had already ousted the smaller country’s leader, and instated one of their own as their president.

They helped. Phil can’t really remember why, now, but they did help. Maybe their plight was honorable enough; maybe Techno’s empathy got the better of him.

The whole situation turned out to be a ruse. The two nations were one and the same, and they were using their sob story to draw on strong fighters who have done dubious things, to either maim or outright kill them.

The betrayal they felt was hot and disgusting, like bile in their throats.

When they escaped from the prison they were put in, Techno had muttered that he’s *never* going to help people like that again.

Techno’s predisposition towards anarchy is... well, it was a choice he made, ideologically speaking. It was evident early on, really; even as a child, he had... *feelings* , about rulers of all kinds, about the way people acted when given too much *power* . He had been very young when he expressed the opinion that no one person should have all the control over a population of people.

But Phil thinks there might be a touch of something deeper, something more instinctual, that drives him towards that ideology. He spent his important formative years in the Nether, a place where violence is as regular and normal as the birds singing. A place where there is no true leader, even in the scattered societies that are built in the dimension. Techno is naturally drawn to anarchy because it’s what makes *sense* to him.

Phil knows he didn’t help with that. He... has his own anarchist tendencies, honestly, and they really rubbed off on Techno.

“I think... you did what you thought was right,” he says, carefully. “You reacted in a way that made sense to you. You felt hurt and betrayed, and like they hadn’t listened to you about the risks of government and power. So you... reacted.”

Techno huffs and scrunches up his nose in mild annoyance. “It wasn’t a *good* reaction, I know that now.” His hand twitches and he frowns down at it. “I killed Tommy. I-- I basically

pinned everything on him, and shouted him down, and then... just before I spawned the withers, I killed him,” his voice gets choked. “I don’t think... I don’t think I could do that now.”

He squeezes his hand again and rubs his thumb on the side of his palm. He’s wrapped his hands in bandages again, probably because he was about to go to bed. He knows the braces aren’t comfortable. “I don’t think you could either. You love him a lot.”

He nods a little roughly, tears shining on his eyelashes. “I... I don’t know why I thought that was right,” his voice is weak and shaky, “I wasn’t thinkin’ clearly, I... I thought that would *fix* things. Getting rid of the people and places that hurt me, destroyin’ what they used me to get back--” He pulls his hand away from his and raises both of them to grab at the loose strands of his hair. “But it didn’t fix anything! Wilbur and I were *both wrong*! Destroyin’ things-- it didn’t fix anything! Everything just keeps getting *worse*!”

Phil takes both of his hands from his hair-- feeling a great sense of deja vu as he does so, because he’s spent *so* much time stopping Techno from pulling his own hair-- and holds them tightly in his own. “Easy, Tech,” he murmurs. “It’s okay. You’re aware of your mistakes, and you’re trying your best to fix things.” He rubs his thumb against the middle of his right palm gently. “Things are definitely... *complicated*, and not nearly as good as they could be. But that isn’t *entirely your fault*.”

Techno draws in a small, shaky breath, tightening his fingers around his own, trembling all over. “I...” he trails off, staring down at their hands. “I don’t *want* to hurt anyone anymore,” he says quietly. “I’m done with that. I’m... I’m *tired*, Phil. I just want to *rest*. But...” he audibly swallows; he can hear the click of his throat. “They won’t *let* me. The arrest, Quackity stalkin’ us, Dream, th-the voices...” He trails off and his eyes go dark, just like they were all day. “I can’t rest.”

“I’m sorry,” Phil murmurs, still holding his hands tightly to soothe him. He doesn’t know what to say, but he wants to comfort him as much as he can. Even if he feels like there’s a layer to it that he doesn’t understand, he wants to comfort him. “Eventually, we’ll leave here, and you won’t have to hurt anyone if you don’t want to.”

“We could leave now, couldn’t we?” Techno asks, turning his eyes to the window. There’s the smallest hint of hope in his voice. “I mean, someone might try to stop us. But... we could leave. All of us could.”

He swallows the guilt. He knew not telling those he cares for about the server being locked would come back to haunt him, so he has to own up to it now.

“We can’t leave,” he says gently. “The server... it’s locked. There’s no exit.”

Techno’s hands jerk once and he draws them away from him.

A lump builds in his throat as he does so; without a word spoken, he can feel his disapproval almost immediately.

“How long have you known this?” He asks, flat. He’s reminded of many things; the way Techno greeted him after years apart, when he was only eighteen years old-- the way his voice fell when he was talking about Wilbur’s death-- the way his voice stayed oddly even when he started talking again after those four months of silence. “How long have you known that we’re *trapped* ?”

Phil draws in a slow, deep breath. “A few months, now. To be fair, I found out just before you were arrested. It didn’t seem entirely relevant at the time.”

Techno’s eyes flash slightly in the low light of the lanterns set around the loft. His upper lip curls back with a snarl. “You kept this to yourself for *months* ?” he asks, the flatness breaking through for a quiet anger. “We could have been workin’ on a way to get out. You could have *told me* --”

“You weren’t well enough to come up with *any* sort of plan,” he interrupts, trying not to flinch back from the angry light in his eyes. It’s rare that he’s been scared of Techno, but looking at him now... he’s all too aware of the kind of person he raised. “None of you were. And the resurrection--”

“We didn’t *need* to do the resurrection,” he says, nearly a hiss. “Wilbur could have stayed dead. He didn’t fuckin’ want to be brought back, we could have came up with a *plan*--”

Phil swallows thickly and stares down at his lap, feeling like he’s in some kind of horrible danger with how he’s lied. “It wasn’t necessary for you, but... he asked me. Ghostbur did, at least. And...” he runs his fingers over the still-healing cut on his arm, wrapped in clean white bandages to keep the deep wound from becoming infected. “I *had* to do it, Techno. I owed him that. And everything else... just kind of fell off to the side.”

Techno huffs and sinks back onto the bed, running a hand roughly through his hair. “Yeah, that... that makes sense.” He picks up his crown and turns it over in his hands again. His emotions are turning him to restlessness, not to mention he’s still obviously angry and upset. “Sorry. I just-- we’re *trapped* here. If there’s no exit... what are we goin’ to *do* ?”

He scratches at the back of his neck. “I don’t know, really. I’ve been thinking about it, when I can... I searched for the exit. I thought there *had* to be an exit. But no matter where I looked... there was *nothing* . Not a switch, not a door, not a portal... *nothing* .”

(He had looked everywhere he could. He had flown all over the server, likely risking his life a few times when he strayed too close to other people.

There was no exit.

There was no exit.

There was no *exit*.)

He can hear his foot tapping against the floor. “There *has* to be a way to get out,” he mutters. “There has to be. You can’t just-- you can’t *lock* a server like that. There has to be a way out.

Anything that you can get into needs an *exit* . That's how it works." He's babbling, a little. Repeating himself. It's a habit he's always had.

"There... there probably *is* an exit, somewhere." Phil sighs and sinks back on the bed. "But it's pretty well hidden, wherever it is."

"We need to find it," Techno mutters, falling back onto the bed with his arms over his face. "I don't want to stay here anymore. Gettin' out of here is probably our best plan to..." he trails off.

He doesn't need him to complete the statement. He rests a hand on his arm and rubs gently. "We'll find it... whenever we have time."

He huffs again and he can see his ears droop. "Yeah. Whenever we have a time where we've not... dealing with a *lot* of things." He moves his arms off his face and stares up at the ceiling. "We should... probably go to sleep."

Phil nods and gets up from his bed. "*You* really should. You haven't been sleeping well, have you?"

He scrunches his nose up at him. "I've been sleepin' fine," he says, an edge of bitterness in his voice.

He raises his brows as he looks over at him, untucking his blankets from the middle of his nest. "You're having nightmares again," he says softly. "I heard you crying the other night."

Techno goes quiet and stares up at the ceiling for a long minute.

"...It's because of Wilbur bein' back," he admits, tone careful. "It's... kind of hard to adjust to."

Phil sits down on his bed and tugs the blankets around his legs. "It is, isn't it?"

Thinking about Wilbur's cold stare and dismissive actions since he was resurrected makes his chest feel tight and painful.

They sacrificed so much to bring him back. Blood, tears, pieces of their *souls*. Sleepless nights and precious resources.

And he refuses to accept that. He refuses to accept that they gave and gave and *gave* for him.

"He's actin' a bit like he did when we were younger," Techno says, almost too quiet to hear. "After you left."

There's a cold, icy feeling of dread that drips down Phil's spine at the thought. At the reminder of what he did to his sons. With no real justification, really. He acted selfishly and left all three of them alone.

"He acted like this...?" he asks, watching moonlight play across the ceiling.

“Worse, usually. He was a lot more cruel, back then.” He hears Techno’s bed creak as he gets under the blankets. “If he starts actin’ like that again, I reserve the right to kill him.”

He laughs, slightly breathless. “You *just said* you don’t want to hurt anyone.”

“...*I will make an exception.*”

He sighs, amused even with the dread rolling down his spine. “I think he’s just... processing it. He was dead for... a *while*. He’s having to adjust.”

“I guess.”

Silence fills the loft.

Phil had never seen a successful resurrection, before this one. He knew they were possible; the depth of documentation about them, while obscure, was proof that it was possible. But they’re damaging, and rare, and generally considered a bad idea. *A ritual for the most desperate*, as the author of the ritual book had put it.

He thinks about that author sometimes, whoever it was that wrote that book. He found it in a library, years and years ago; it had intrigued him for how simple it was, and the fact that he discovered it behind other books, as if it was being hidden.

He hasn’t been able to figure it out. Maybe he never will.

It’s a powerful artifact, at least. He can tell that much just by holding it, by looking through it, by reading the small notes and commentary from the original author.

He wonders if that person knew what their work would be used for. They repeat in some parts of the book that they think resurrections shouldn’t *ever* be performed, so maybe they knew.

Maybe they knew that book would eventually fall into the hands of a grieving man with little to lose, even that first time around.

He didn’t think about how empty he would feel, after the failed resurrections.

He isn’t sure about the spiritual effects of repeated, failed attempts at necromancy. But he’s aware of the physical effects, at least.

The odd feeling of hollowness in his chest, like longing for a part of him he didn’t even know he had. The small cough he’s been developing. Cold chills, ones *very* unrelated to their arctic home. Slowed healing of wounds; he’s sure that this is why the cut deep into his arm still hasn’t healed, though he’s treated it many times.

(“It should be healed up by now,” Niki had worried, gently holding his arm as she inspected the wound.

Her concern made him feel oddly warm, but full of guilt. He feels terrible about bringing her into his life, really. For making that poor girl care about him. It’s bad enough that his own sons have to worry about him.)

“You’re not goin’ to leave again when we get out of here, right?” Techno’s voice has a soft, childish quality.

Phil blinks up at the ceiling, before looking over at his bed. He’s laying curled up on his side, turned just a bit so he can see his face. He has that plush pig in his arms again (he finds it incredibly charming that he still sleeps with it) and his eyes are a faint flash in the darkness.

“Right,” he assures. “I’m not leaving.”

“That’s good,” he says quietly. “Goodnight.”

He replies in kind.

It hurts a little too much to think about how weak his son’s voice was, saying that. The guilt bubbles in his stomach like hot tar.

(Why did he ever do that to them?)

--

After being resurrected, Wilbur doesn’t dream anymore. His sleep is as deep and dark as his death, nothing but blackness and silence.

Sleep doesn’t really help him feel any better.

He feels weary and tired all the time, even though he can tell that his body is in better shape than ever. Strong muscles and agile limbs and wings that he missed more than he can put into words.

It feels strange to look at himself in the mirror. He can’t remember the last time he looked at his reflection and didn’t feel... disgusted.

Losing his wings made his self confidence crumble entirely. His wings were his pride, in a deep, instinctual kind of way. Seeing himself without them was... *wrong* .

(The first time he saw himself without them, he couldn’t wrap his head around it.

He didn’t look like himself, not at all. Had he always looked that... *small* ? His shoulders looked so narrow, his chest so thin, every joint and bone seeming to show prominently against his pale skin.

He turned in front of the mirror so he could see the bandages over his back. Tommy had just put fresh ones on him, but they were already dotted with blood.

He looked so fragile. Without the extra bulk of his wings and the way they changed his posture... he looked delicate, breakable.

He had barely resisted the urge to break that mirror.)

Wilbur stares at his own reflection in the mirror.

He looks... healthy. Very *alive*, reasonably.

There are golden freckles spread across his cheeks, nose, and shoulders. Gold feathers are scattered throughout the white of his wings. His eyes glitter like unfamiliar gems.

There's a large, sprawling scar on his chest. The middle of it is pure gold and dense, a pointed slit a few inches long, and lightning-like patterns of the same color spread out along his skin in all directions, from his chest trailing up to his shoulders and down his stomach, stopping just below his navel.

He hasn't asked what was involved in their resurrection ritual. But he's gathered that the hints of gold spread along his body are a *result* of that.

His wings spread out cautiously in the small bathroom, soft feathers ruffling and moving as he stretches them.

He looks at himself for a long, long moment.

He looks alive.

Maybe *too* alive.

His eyes are too bright. His skin is too clear and perfect. His hair is too perfectly curled and always falls just a little bit too well, gold streaks and all. His wings barely show any sort of dirt or dust or damage from flying, which is particularly strange; the white feathers used to collect dust like nothing else, but not now.

Wilbur feels mildly horrified by his reflection. He looks... wrong, just slightly. Something like the uncanny valley.

He pulls on his clothes, trying to avoid his own reflection.

The house is oddly quiet, right now. Phil is outside with Niki-- he can hear the sound of his voice through the walls. Techno is upstairs in the loft, taking a nap as far as he knows.

When he steps out of the bathroom, walking towards the kitchen, he can see Tommy, perched on the edge of the couch, sketching determinedly in his book. Ranboo is sitting in the armchair, upside-down, legs thrown over the back of the chair and his black-and-white hair dangling down to brush the floor. He has a book in his hands, somehow reading while in such an odd position.

"How do you not have a headache?" Tommy is asking as Wilbur walks past. "If I did that, I would feel terrible."

"It's not bothering me at all," Ranboo says cheerfully. His tail flicks against the backrest of the chair. "I mean, I'm a little dizzy. But I'll be fine."

"You're so weird," he says, shaking his head, before going back to his drawing. "At least this is a fun pose to draw."

Wilbur pauses in getting himself something to eat.

Tommy does still draw, then. Interesting. He hasn't noticed him doing that, since he was brought back. He's been in his head a lot, to be fair.

(He had stopped, at some point. He can't... remember why, exactly. But he remembers that he stopped.)

(There are many such holes in his memories. Places where his memory seems to have been completely blanked out. Not to mention the fact that he has no memories from his time as a ghost.)

He makes himself a sandwich and pours himself some coffee-- they always seem to have a pot of it ready, likely because they're a family of night-owls (pun intended, he supposes).

He carries his food and drink to the living room, where he settles himself on the end of the couch, opposite from Tommy.

His little brother looks up, what looks like concern registering on his features. A lock of his hair has fallen loose from where he has his bangs pinned back, and it dangles down in his eyes. (It's the white streak, he notes.) "...hey," he greets, cautious in a way that Wilbur unfortunately recognizes.

He nods in response, taking a bite of his sandwich.

The quiet air becomes thick with tension. It's disgusting, in a way. Every moment he spends around his family is like that, heavy and stifling with concern and discomfort.

(Notably, though, none of them seem *guilty* .)

"Do you, uh..." Tommy starts, trailing off for a moment. "Do you want us to move? W-we don't have to do this here, if you want u-us to leave..."

The stutter isn't new. It's another unfortunately recognizable thing. Tommy had a stutter when they first met, when Phil brought home a grubby little five-year-old with matted hair and wild wings. And it always comes up when he's upset or anxious.

The stutter is *familiar* in a way that stokes both worry and anger in Wilbur's chest.

"No, you're fine," he says, inappropriately cold. "You're not going to bother me."

Tommy hesitates for a moment, fiddling with a dark blue pencil. There are scars all over his knuckles, he notes, and up his arms, exposed in the short-sleeved shirt he's wearing.

(Those are recognizable, too.)

"Yeah, okay," he says carefully, shifting to sit more comfortably on the arm of the couch.

Wilbur sips his coffee.

The tension gets heavier, like the hot, still air before a violent storm.

He's kept most of his thoughts about the resurrection quiet. Sure, he's expressed a few negative beliefs, but it hasn't been the *full* extent of what he's feeling.

He feels betrayed. Why on earth would he beg to be killed-- *by his own father!* -- if he also wanted to be brought back? He was ready to be dead. He was done with life, done with everything in the living world. He was more than content with nonexistence. He wanted to be dead. If he wasn't so much of a coward, he would have killed himself.

And now he's back among the living. And everything feels just slightly *wrong*. Wrong in a way similar to his appearance.

Techno and Tommy are both noticeably quieter.

Phil doesn't pursue him when he withdraws from him. There's an element of helplessness constantly contained within his eyes.

Niki-- he's not sure what's different, about Niki. But there's something *changed*, something *new* in her; she seems... hardened, less open and kind. She's barely spoken to him, and when she does, she's incredibly curt and to the point with her words. Indifference flows off of her.

And... he doesn't see why Ranboo is here. He's skittish, almost to a comical degree-- he flinches at most sounds, his hands are always fidgeting and wringing, and he always seems poised to run away. Tommy seems fairly attached to him, but Wilbur doesn't feel like that's enough of a reason for Techno to let him live with him.

Techno's new attitude is... very odd. He's more talkative, honestly, but at the same time, he's quieter. He looks smaller than before; his shoulders less strong and broad, his face subtly thinner, his hands seeming bonier. He wears his hair down often; it falls below his waist, now.

He just seems... *softer*, all the way around.

Which is absurd. Techno isn't *soft*. He wasn't even soft when they were kids; he was the troublemaker, the one who would get dragged back to the house by the people in their closest town because he was raising havoc, the one who picked fights with Wilbur himself because he was a petty, jealous brat.

The one who went off on aimless adventures with another boy who was a known criminal, even to them. The one who came home injured often.

(The one who came home soaked in blood, clothes disheveled, eyes stuck open with horror, breathing heavy.)

(He feels like what happened then was at least *partially* Techno's fault, now that he's a bit removed from the emotional impact of it. Techno was and is smart; he has a quiet belief that he should have realized that situation was bad.)

This version of Techno feels... false. Like a facade of some sort.

Everyone else seems to believe it. Tommy seems comfortable with him, as does Niki. Ranboo spent a good portion of last night braiding Techno's hair over and over again. And Phil...

Well. Phil has always believed Techno, in every scenario. He's always been his favorite.

He doesn't know if Techno knows that. But he wouldn't put it past him to be aware and *revel* in it.

Tommy shifts on the couch, leaning down over his sketchbook. "Don't move," he says to Ranboo. "I'm trying to figure out your face."

"I can unhinge my jaw if you want," Ranboo says, grinning. "That would be interesting to draw."

"Please don't," he snickers. "Does that hurt, by the way?"

"Kind of? It doesn't hurt my jaw or anything, but I usually end up tearing my cheek when I do it..."

Wilbur watches the two of them with a low confusion. It's strange, really. Tommy seems so, so comfortable with Ranboo.

In fact, the only time he's ever seen him so comfortable with another person, it was with Tubbo. Who... apparently isn't on good terms with any of them, anymore. Bringing him up seemed to be a bad idea the two times he's tried.

("He's your best friend, shouldn't you know what's going on with him?" Wilbur watched as Tommy moved to sit cross legged on the kitchen counter.

"I haven't been back since I was exiled," he said in that odd, colorless tone. "And I've heard enough from Ranboo to know the broad strokes of it." He blinked a few times, his mouth twitching into a frown. His eyes looked vaguely shiny. "I don't want to talk about him.")

(He went and locked himself in his room, after that.)

"And... it's done," Tommy says proudly, putting his pencil to the side.

"Ooh!" Ranboo practically falls out of the armchair, skittering forward on all fours for a moment before getting to his feet and hurrying over to sit next to him. "Can I see?"

He grins and turns the sketchbook to face him. His eyes light up and he makes a kind of chittery, chirpy noise. "Oh, you made me look so cool!" He throws his arms around Tommy and squishes him in a hug. "Thank you, thank you, thank you!"

"I'm being crushed," he says, laughing. "You're welcome."

Wilbur takes an idle sip of his coffee. "Can I see?"

He doesn't think before saying it. Maybe he should have, because Tommy flinches and Ranboo makes another chittery sound, his arms tightening around him.

For a long moment, his little brother just stares at him, eyes a little wide, his mouth turned into a small frown.

He fiddles with the binding of the book. “Yeah, sure. B-but, uh... here, just look.” He turns the book so he can see the page.

He’s rendered Ranboo’s lanky form and strange pose perfectly on the paper, sketched out in a way that makes the whole drawing look interesting and dynamic. The blue pencil is accented perfectly by highlights of black and white, and... it just looks *good* .

Tommy has gotten a lot more competent with his art, apparently.

Wilbur feels himself smile a little, and he raises his hand to take the sketchbook from him. “Can I look through--”

As soon as his hand even gets near the book, Tommy goes wide eyed and pulls it to his chest, folding his arms over it. He’s shaking, a little bit. He looks... scared.

This isn’t... this time, he can tell he’s not scared of *him* . This is something else, something *new* . Sure, he hasn’t been kind about his art before, but that was obviously a good thing, because it motivated him to get better.

If he’s not scared of me, what is he scared of?

Wilbur forces a cool smile. He’s not sure how well it comes off. “That looks really good, Tommy. You’re pretty talented.” His voice sounds odd even to himself.

Tommy gives a little nod and holds the sketchbook closer. “Thanks,” he says, and there’s a slightly childish tone of panic in the single word.

That panic makes the flames of rage lick at his stomach. Why is he so scared? He’s never actually *hurt* him, not even once. He cares so much for him.

I can give you something to be afraid of.

Outside, he can hear the sound of Phil’s laughter, and Niki speaking in an excited tone.

“Have you been practicing a lot?” Wilbur asks, glancing at the book. “You’ve gotten good.”

Tommy’s flash of a smile is intensely false. “Uh, yeah, I-I... kinda.” He blinks forcefully, in the way he does before he starts crying. “I, um, had to leave behind all... all my old art supplies when I got e-exiled. So I didn’t get to- to really draw for a bit.” His eyes dart up to meet Wilbur’s for a moment, before he looks down at the floor. “But I got good at drawing with charcoal, so that- that’s pretty cool...”

“It is,” he agrees. The tension in the air just keeps getting thicker. He could take a knife to it. “Can I look through your sketchbook? I want to look at everything you’ve done.”

He stares at the floor for a few painfully long seconds.

“No, you can’t look- look through it,” Tommy says carefully, his stutter getting worse. “I-it’s mine. I d-don’t want t-to share it with you.”

More rage builds inside of him. There’s a part of him-- a *loud* part of him-- that’s incredibly angry about his reaction to this.

“Come on, Tommy,” he says in a harsher tone. He flinches, and he can hear Ranboo make one of those odd enderman noises. “It’s not like I’m going to throw it in the fireplace or anything. I just want to look.”

That was apparently a poor choice of words. Tommy flinches again, ducking his head and drawing his wings in close. The tan and grey feathers ruffle as they move. “I don’t w-want to let you look at it,” he says in a whisper. “It’s per- personal stuff.”

Wilbur grits his teeth. He’s so stubborn sometimes. “You know, this just makes you look incredibly fucking suspicious, right?” His harsh tone is only getting worse. “What’s so important that you can’t share it with me?”

He reaches out a hand to take the book with some level of force. He’ll pry the kids’ hands off of it if he has to.

He grabs his arm, trying to pull it away from the sketchbook.

Tommy chirps in alarm and tries to lean back, out of his reach. His eyes are wide and his breathing is noticeably quickened.

Suddenly, a clawed, pure-white hand grabs his wrist.

There is a disturbing, familiar growl filling the room. His hair raises and his feathers do the same.

Wilbur looks up from the hand tightly clutching his wrist.

Ranboo stopped him from taking Tommy’s sketchbook.

His face is in an expression of rage, protectiveness flashing in his mismatched eyes. His mouth is twisted so his teeth are bared, all of them. A few streams of bright-red blood drip down his white cheek, where the skin seems to be slightly torn.

“Leave his sketchbook alone,” the boy says in a low, intense voice, interrupting the growl.

He’s the one growling. Wilbur remembers, now, what creature makes that particular noise. That’s the warning sound of an enderman.

Something you hear briefly before it rips you to pieces.

He’s trying to intimidate him.

That’s even more irritating.

Wilbur jerks his hand away from him, not caring when he lets out a distorted noise or when Tommy curls further into himself, that damn book held tightly to his chest.

He grabs his dishes from the side table and marches them to the kitchen. He puts them in the sink and rinses them, maybe a bit more aggressively than needed.

He hears the two boys begin to whisper between themselves.

Techno has obviously rubbed off on him, he thinks with bitterness. *He made him always see the worst in people. Especially me.*

Paranoid bastard. You made him terrified of me.

He turns off the sink and goes to the bookshelf to grab something to read. (One thing he can commend Techno for; he has a decent collection of good books.)

He can't pick at first. He pulls a few books out and reads a handful of pages, but he ends up putting every single one back. None of it engages him.

Nothing he does seems to really *engage* him, anymore.

Dying takes away any ambition, it seems.

He settles for a crime thriller. Techno has many of those; he's a sucker for melodrama and impractical plots.

He goes back to the living room to sit down. He doesn't glance at the boys.

They're still murmuring to each other, words so soft they're mostly intelligible.

Wilbur stares down at the black cover of the book. This is the first time he's felt this genuinely *angry*, after being brought back.

Tommy shouldn't hide things from him, he's his big brother. He practically raised him. He deserves to see whatever is in there.

But he won't show him.

What a little brat.

--

Ranboo has started having... very *odd* dreams.

First, of course, is the fact that he can *remember* them. Usually, they're completely gone by the time he wakes up.

But for the last little while... he's been able to remember them enough to write them down in the morning. He even dedicated an entire book to this odd situation.

Second, the dreams are... well, they're nightmares, really. But nothing about them is very coherent, or outwardly *scary* ..

It's always the same; he's walking through a dense forest, carrying a lantern to light his way. It only lights the area immediately around him, and everything beyond that is entirely black.

He doesn't run or anything. He just... walks, unhurried and easy...

And something is always following him. It's never in reach of his light, but he can feel it watching him. He can feel eyes on his back, his chest, his own gaze when it dares to.

Every morning, he wakes up feeling... confused, and somehow paralyzed with fear.

He should talk to someone about it. He really should.

But he's not going to, obviously. No one would have any answers, and besides, his nightmares aren't really important in the grand scheme of things.

They have bigger problems than him.

And there's another problem for him too; Wilbur.

Wilbur is, frankly, *very* uncomfortable to be around.

His emotions are strong, but a kind of strong that... doesn't quite feel *right*. Unlike other people's strong emotions, they feel... sharp, almost. Like his emotions themselves are barbed, sharpened, made to damage and scar anyone who tries to figure them out.

The house is full of negative emotions, at this point. It lingers around the rooms like a thick cloud of smoke, choking and toxic and *dangerous* .

Ranboo doesn't particularly like how aware he is of the pain everyone else is feeling. It's... exhausting, especially when he can't really help.

Sure, he does what he can. He quickly does any chores he's assigned, any task he's asked to assist with, things like that. He stays quiet and keeps his head down and doesn't argue about anything. That's how you make everyone more comfortable with your presence; you stay out of their way entirely.

But he can't tell if it's helping. Probably not.

The thick feelings in the house are exhausting. Sometimes they're vague, just a shapeless *bad feeling* .

And sometimes, they have words, imagery, sounds attached to them.

Breaking glass. A sink with puddles of bright-red blood at the bottom. The sound of (drunken?) laughter.

He wants to help. But... if he brings it up, if he brings up any specifics, they're going to think he's been spying on them. That he's been prying in their minds. He hasn't, of course, his abilities are completely passive, but... but...

He doesn't want to bother anyone.

So he bites his tongue and does what he can.

Part of what he can do is distract Tommy from whatever bad feelings he has. Mostly, that involves drawing.

He's rarely seen him as calm as he is while he's drawing. It's nice, seeing him relaxed and enjoying himself.

Ranboo is a very willing model. Always.

That's how he ended up laying upside-down in the armchair for thirty minutes as Tommy sketched him. He lied when he said the position wasn't bothering him; he definitely had a headache after a bit.

He had been more than flattered with how the drawing actually ended up, though. No one has ever put effort into drawing *him*, of all people. And Tommy made him look... handsome. Interesting, even.

And then Wilbur decided to get involved.

He tried to take away his sketchbook.

Ranboo didn't really even *think* about it, when he reached out to grab his wrist tightly. His voice sounded strangely dark even to his own ears when he spoke, interrupting the angry growl that was leaving his body, rumbling through his whole body.

"Leave his sketchbook alone."

Wilbur was... very angry. Chokingly so. He got a few images from him, bad ones; bright red cloth waving, a lighter being clicked and sparking a large flame to life, bloodied knuckles, a crushed cigarette in a metal ashtray, an explosion of light and fire.

He jerked his arm away and stormed off.

Ranboo lets out an upset chirp and looks down at his hand, frowning. That wasn't... why did he do that?

Tommy is sitting next to him, hugging his sketchbook, staring at his lap.

"Thank you," he mumbles. "I, uh... yeah, just... thanks."

He looks up from his hand, and he can see the twisted frown on his face, the shininess in his eyes.

“No problem,” he replies, very softly. “Has he tried to take your art stuff before?”

He winces. “Yeah. I got in trouble once, when I-I was younger, and he, uh... he took a-all my pencils and stuff. I think he- he used them for firewood, b-back then.”

Ranboo’s eyes widen. “I didn’t think your family was like that,” he whispers without thinking.

Tommy lets out a breath that might have been the very beginning of a laugh. “They’re not. Wilbur’s the-the only one who’s *ever* been l-like that.”

He puts his hand on the couch between them, palm facing upwards. Without even looking down, he places his own hand in his and laces their fingers together.

“I’m not gonna let him be mean to you, y’know.” Ranboo is surprised by the conviction in his own voice.

“Yeah, I know.” Tommy rests his cheek in his free hand, his elbow resting on his thigh. “And if he tries to go after you...” He trails off, brows furrowing.

He squeezes his hand comfortingly. No words are needed; he can feel the sincerity coming off of him.

(It’s unfair, how they feel the need to be so protective over eachother.)

Chapter End Notes

i feel like i need to inform people: one of the bigger themes in an upcoming chapter (i think its going to be the one after the next? so chapter 10ish) is going to be pretty explicit rape/assault. im warning ahead of time so everyone can be prepared <3

im gonna go play minecraft now. goodbye,,

the light of the world is fading

Chapter Notes

does a weird little slug dance hi folks. i return.

update about dove's life: my chronic pain is still! pure terrible! i have a cyst on my spinal cord that has been consistently causing me pain for years, but especially the whole of 2021 so far. i'm going to get surgery within the next few months or so that will fix this pain for hopefully forever. fingers crossed, my friends.

but!!! new chapter <333 a nice little interim chapter between another few Big Ones soon heehoo. now we're just dealin' with some emotions and such. some things. this is mostly me trying to get back into the swing of writing while i'm in such a State ;U;

warning for references to past abuse.

title from pearl diver by mitski!!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

They've just finished dinner. All six of them. The kitchen is loud with the noise of washing dishes and putting away food.

Wilbur sits back in his chair and observes Techno and Tommy across the table from him. They're talking quietly to each other, while Tommy is showing their brother something in his sketchbook. Judging by Techno's especially crooked and proud smile, it's something good.

Wilbur grits his teeth briefly, before saying, "So, *he's* allowed to look in your sketchbook?"

Tommy jolts, eyes widening as his head raises to meet his gaze. His fingers go white-knuckled around the cover of the book. "I-I... y-yes..." his eyes begin to dart around frantically.

"He had somethin' he wanted to show me," Techno says in an even tone. "I don't push past that. His art is important to him." He adjusts his glasses and brushes a stubborn lock of his hair behind his ear. The actions are inappropriately familiar; he watched Techno do the same thing during dinner for years, trying to keep his glasses and hair in place while he ate.

Wilbur hadn't realized how tightly his hands are curled into fists, how much his legs are shaking. "Important enough that he won't share with me?" Bitterness flows from his tone like running water. "When I'm not the one who *killed him*?"

He can see the color fade from Techno's cheeks, the light from his eyes. His expression doesn't melt into despair, however; it shifts into annoyance, a faint anger. "Unlike you,

Wilbur, I actually made up for somethin' terrible that I did." His hands are loosely clasped on the table. "Trust me, if I wanted Tommy actually dead, he would have permanently died then. I wasn't thinkin' clearly when I did that, nor did I *intend* to end his life, so he survived."

His upper lip curls slightly, revealing his teeth, razor-sharp. "And I'd think nursin' him back to health after he broke into my house and nearly froze to death in the basement is atonement enough for my sins," his tone is full of sarcasm, but also the sincerity that his bold voice always carries.

Tommy clears his throat and shifts in his chair. "I think it is too," he says, and while he's quiet, he doesn't sound scared. Not like earlier. "I-I mean... at least he tried to make up for it." A strange flinch goes through his face and he hugs his sketchbook closer. "You never really tried to be better."

Wilbur growls quietly, standing up from the table. "I tried *so* hard to give you a good life," he says, even and calm as his hands curl into fists. "Both of you. Don't you *dare* say I never tried."

Techno huffs and leans back in his chair, arms crossed. "Oh, so that's what we're sayin' your behavior was? Tryin' to give us a good life?" He can hear his foot tapping. "Don't really see how breakin' my glasses four times because you hit me so hard was part of that. Or lockin' Tommy out during a thunderstorm because he pissed you off."

Behind them, at the sink, dishes clatter together.

Wilbur doesn't dare look away from where he's locked eyes with Techno. His eyes are a shimmery, deep shade of purple. His eyelashes are so pale, especially against the deep circles under his eyes. He looks just as strong and hot-headed as he was as a teenager.

"Please don't fight," Tommy whispers. "I don't w-want you two to fight."

"We're not goin' to," Techno says, not breaking eye contact. "He wouldn't win, anyway."

Wilbur grits his teeth once more and sinks back into his chair. His fists are curled so tightly his palms ache. His temples pound with a headache that his anger isn't helping. "I did my *best* with you two," he says lowly. "It wasn't like it was *easy*."

"Never said it was," his younger brother says flatly. "I get that it was hard. But you could have tried a bit harder not to be an abusive--"

Tommy lets out a panicked cry when Wilbur reaches out to grab Techno by the wrist, yanking him to his feet as he rises as well. "Shut up," he grits out. "I'm not going to let you lie like that, I swear--"

Techno gives a disconcerting growl and jerks his wrist free from his grip, his hand going down to rest over the handle of the knife in his belt. "Yeah, you're doin' a real good job convincing me you're not exactly the same as you were before."

He steps aside and puts his free hand on Tommy's shoulder consolingly. "We've all changed, Wilbur. You could do it for the better, if you were even *interested* in that."

In response, Wilbur concisely spits "fuck you" and turns to leave the room.

-

Niki balances herself on a fallen log, her wings spreading out to help her without a thought.

Her thoughts are full.

Realistically, she knew Wilbur wouldn't exactly be in a good mood about being brought back.

But she expected some kind of understanding. She expected him to be kinder. She expected him to be more like the man she loved so deeply.

He's not. He's not at *all*. He's being cruel in a way that's more like the madman she knew before his death.

A rabbit bounces past, atop the spring snow. She pauses atop the log to watch it hop into the woods, fluffy white ears and tail disappearing among the white.

Attack it.

She shakes her head abruptly and jumps off the log. The rabbit rounds the corner and disappears from her sight.

She's never been a violent person, before now. She's... scared of herself, sometimes. Her mind travels to dark places.

She finds herself replaying the moment she broke Quackity's arm. She had no idea she was that strong, but apparently she is.

She could feel the crack of his bones, and it filled her with a morbid happiness. A morbid sense of... something being right, about that. About the senseless violence.

No, not quite senseless. She was protecting Ranboo, she was protecting a scared kid who was just robbed of a sense and was having a hard time even walking. She was protecting him from someone who just wanted to hurt him.

Quackity used to be nice. She remembers that he was funny and easygoing and fun to be around.

But this server seems to have brought out the worst in people.

She thinks about Tubbo. She hasn't spoken to him in a good while, even ignoring how she's moved out here. But when she did speak to him...

He was very clearly hungover, though still dressed in a suit with his hair halfheartedly styled. He had a smile on his face, but it looked pale and uncertain when paired with his dark circles and the redness of his eyes and the cracked state of his lips.

It was while she still lived in L'manberg, before she moved into her old home, the one she built nestled in the woods, craving the sense of safety the trees gave her. But at the moment, she was still among the citizens of the country.

"Hi, Tubbo," Niki had called with mild hesitation, as he passed her on the street.

Tubbo didn't seem to expect the greeting, because he jolted and stopped dead in his tracks. His blue-and-green eyes were wide and bright when he turned to look at her.

"Oh." He blinked rapidly, before his pale smile tugged up into something more real. "Hi, Niki." He waved a hand, and she had immediately noted the bandages on his arm, becoming visible when his sleeve slipped slightly down.

She smiled back at him and patted his arm. "How are you? I feel like it's been forever since we talked."

He shifted in place, raising a hand to rub the back of his neck. "Yeah, hah, I've been... kinda busy."

(Thinking about it now, she thinks that might have been when his drinking turned from a problem to a death sentence.)

They had exchanged more pleasantries. Every time Niki tried to pry about what Tubbo was feeling or dealing with, he shut her down with a weak smile and a forced laugh.

By the time they parted, going back to their own plans for the day, she felt sick with worry.

Now, her sympathy is... lowered. Between staging Techno's execution and blinding Ranboo's eye, it's clear to her that Tubbo is a bit of a lost cause. Which hurts; he used to be such a vibrant, kind kid...

But again. This server isn't good for *anyone*.

Niki tosses her hair from her face and grabs her axe, from where she left it leaning against a tree. The familiar weight of the weapon is comforting, a stable thing.

Being comforted by a weapon is new, too. She never knew that she could feel so... alive, when holding a weapon. But she feels like she could take over the world when she wields this axe.

Maybe it's because it was a gift from Techno.

She smiles at the thought and shifts her hold on the weapon until it feels right.

She wants to practice with it, though she has nothing to attack and no one to spar with. She supposes she could ask Techno or Phil, but the idea is oddly daunting. So practicing against

nothing will work for now.

She swings her axe at invisible opponents.

The netherite is perfectly weighted when compared to her own body weight, so she's almost never unbalanced and feels perfectly stable. Even her most daring moves don't knock her off center.

She's having a good time destroying imagined creatures, until it becomes routine enough for her thoughts to wander.

She never... really knew the details of Wilbur being left to raise his brothers on his own. She knew it happened— she was around then, though she was also young— but the details were never shared with her.

The few bits of knowledge she has now don't paint a very pretty picture.

Phil left, for some reason. Wilbur was left to raise his brothers, both under sixteen.

And he was filled with resentment over it. That's clear in how he talks to them now, how he talked to them during Pogtopia...

And now. He's angry and bitter and combative and— and refuses to *change*. He's the same bitter mess of a man that she knew before the TNT went off.

Niki grits her teeth and swings her axe particularly violently. Her boots cut through the crust of the snow below them just as her blade cuts through an imaginary monster.

He very nearly hit Techno this morning. They were arguing, and she had caught a horrifying glimpse of Wilbur raising his hand to strike his brother across the face.

Techno had flatly said "If you hit me, I'm just goin' to bite you."

She thinks that was a reasonable response.

She doesn't know why she expected Wilbur to handle this well. He was too far gone when he died, and he was restored to life exactly in that state. His mind was corrupted by anger and bitterness and madness, and it still is.

It *still* is.

She hadn't noticed herself walking forward with every strike, until her axe slams into a tree instead of air.

The contact jolts her whole body and she jerks back to awareness of her present situation.

The head of her axe is buried several inches into the thick trunk of a spruce tree. Splinted bark and wood sticks out around the cut in the tree.

She's breathing heavily, her body warm and a thin sweat on her skin despite the cool air.

Her arms are shaking a bit from exertion, but she still pries her axe from the tree and turns around to return to the cabin, to her own home.

She's still thinking about Wilbur.

This version of him isn't the man she loved. This version of him isn't her close friend and confidant and sometimes protector. This version of him isn't *right*.

The version of Wilbur she loved really is dead and gone.

She stops in her tracks, holding her axe tightly, her body shaking in a way that's not related to the snow on the ground.

She's not sad. She's *angry*, in a hot, unflinching way, like a bright forest fire.

It's not fair.

It's not fair that Wilbur died, that he lost his mind, that everything was so *terrible*.

They all deserve better. *All* of them.

She whirls around with her axe, storming back to the treeline. She stares at the tree she accidentally struck.

She doesn't so much as flinch when she swings her weapon into it again, right in the same place. The splintering of the wood is like the splintering of bone.

Her hot anger rises and she keeps striking the tree, gritting her teeth, feeling each impact in her arms, her sore shoulders, her back.

It's not fair. It's not fair. It's not fair. It's not fair.

IT'S NOT FAIR.

It's almost a shock when she cuts the tree clean through, and it falls to the side, crashing into the snow and sending up flakes and clumps that hit her clothes and melt into the fabric.

"Well, we needed firewood," Techno says from behind her.

Niki turns around, clutching her axe close to her chest in odd shame. Her anger drains away in favor of embarrassment.

He arches a brow at her and cocks his head to the side. "Somethin' wrong?"

She swallows forcefully. "I was just... thinking..."

"What about?" He asks, and he glances at the fallen tree. "Must've been somethin' fairly bad, if you're cuttin' down trees and cryin' like that."

She lets her grip on her axe loosen slightly, and her arms lower, so she's not holding it so protectively. "I..." she blinks hard. She *is* crying, tears running down her cheeks in hot

streams, contrasting the cold breeze. “I was-- I was thinking about Wilbur. A-and, um. How he’s been acting...”

Techno brushes some of his hair from his face and frowns at her with concern. “Yeah, I... I’ve been thinkin’ about that a lot too,” he says hesitantly, stepping forward to get closer to her. “It’s not great to see, is it?”

Niki nods jerkily, digging her fingers into her gloves again. “He tried to *hit* you,” she says, further embarrassed by the whiny tone in her voice. “Did he-- did he do that before? When you were younger?”

His brows raise and he shrugs. “A few times.” He reaches his hand up to rub his cheek with the side of his palm. “I could win in a fight against him now, don’t worry about it.”

She laughs, but it comes out as a sob.

Suddenly, she loses her grip on her axe and it falls into the snow. Her tears increase until they’re blocking her vision, and she’s aware of a terrible hitching, sobbing noise that has to be her.

“Hey, hey—” Techno says in a slightly panicky tone, and his arms wrap around her, warm and comforting. “I’ve got you, it’s okay.”

He brings her close to his chest, and she doesn’t hesitate to wrap her own arms around him tightly, digging her fingers into his shirt, burying her face in his shoulder. He keeps his arms adjusted so he doesn’t crush her wings even with their height difference, and he runs a hand soothingly through her hair.

“I don’t know why he’s like this,” she says through her sobs, shamed by how hysterical her voice comes out. “I just want him to understand what we did for him!”

“I know,” he soothes. “He’s actin’ horrible, and I’m sorry you have to see it.”

She clutches tighter at his shirt. “I hate it,” she says, still wild. “I hate *him*. He doesn’t get to treat us like this when we— we were *helping him!*”

Techno doesn’t seem to have words for that one— he just keeps petting her hair and holding her close, silently protecting her.

Niki’s hysterical sobbing isn’t fueled by any particular sadness. She’s still so wildly angry, building up again after her embarrassment.

It’s not fair.

She lets herself cry for a while, and just as she’s thinking of pulling away, Techno squeezes her shoulders and kisses the top of her head. “Let’s go inside and get you somethin’ warm to drink. You’re shakin’ pretty bad now.”

She snuffles. She agrees on principle, but that means going back inside the cabin, with Wilbur’s cruel words and Tommy’s wide-eyed horror and Ranboo’s anxiety and Phil’s

somehow both detached and extreme dread—

“We can go inside your place, I don’t mind,” he says, seemingly casually. He shifts to hold her around the waist and moves back, just enough to allow her a bit of space. “You can return that book you borrowed, too.”

Gratitude fills the spaces still vacant in her chest even with the rage.

-

Ranboo wakes up outside.

He blinks a few times, confused.

The early morning sun is bright and cold. His skin is stinging with the aftermath of the new snow that presumably just finished falling. He’s only dressed in his pajamas and his boots.

He shivers and hugs himself. How did he get out here?

He’s standing in front of that tree again. The big silvery spruce, with its twisted branches and large, heavy needles. He’s woken up here three times in the past week.

He can’t figure out the significance of this tree. But...

He keeps waking up here. Something is important about it, but he’s not sure what it is.

He stares up at the heavy spruce branches with a frown. What is he doing outside? He’s cold and can’t stop shivering and he wants to go back to bed.

Something cracks in the nearby trees and he jolts, turning to the treeline and staring into them.

He had that nightmare again.

It was a little bit different, though.

He could see the thing following him. A pure black figure with just one distinguishing feature.

A white smile.

And he could hear Dream’s *voice*. He couldn’t understand the words, but he could hear him speaking, seemingly repeating the same words over and over again.

That nightmare is infinitely scarier with Dream’s murmurs filling his mind. He can still hear them now, filling him with despair and fear...

He needs to get back inside. He turns away from the trees now, but as soon as his back is even close to being turned, he can hear a frightened whisper.

“ ***Don’t turn your back on the trees.*** ”

Ranboo goes tense, his feet rooting themselves on the snow, his hands fidgeting as his claws go on edge.

That was another enderman. Another young one, too. Maybe even younger than him?

That whisper wasn't a physical one, either. Instead, it's the quiet, psychic whispering of an ender being.

They must be trying to hide even from him.

"Why not?" he asks in reply, turning himself back to the still trees. His hands are twitchy. "Is something in there?"

"***Not now,***" they say vaguely. Their voice is so high, especially compared to his own. They're very young, he can tell it even more now. "***But there are things in here with me. You spoke to one of them.***"

A chill goes down his back, unrelated to the cool weather. "What are you... what do you *know* is in there with you?"

(Dream has been stalking them, it's obvious. He can feel his presence all over the forest.

Quackity, as well, but... Techno killed him, so he's not sure if he would be there now. That wasn't long ago at all.

And... who else? He's fairly sure there's someone else, but he doesn't know who it could be...)

"***The golden bird,***" the enderman says in an airy voice. "***Not anymore, though. He's gone, all gone. A little fox was here, but he's gone too.***"

Ranboo swallows thickly from fear, and his tail flicks, just above the snow.

"***And something strange,***" they continue. "***Something not human. Something I don't understand. A creature in all green, wearing a mask. It spoke to you.***"

Dream, then. He spoke to Dream...

"***You looked odd,***" they say, still in that strange tone. "***Your eye was glowing so brightly, and you wouldn't really speak at all. It just spoke to you, over and over. Trying to tell you something...***"

He inhales shakily. "I sleepwalk, sometimes." It doesn't make any sense, of course, but... he could have spoken to him while he was sleepwalking, right?

"***That makes sense,***" they acknowledge, and he can see their green eyes appear in the foliage. They glow brightly in the dark leaves, and that's just evidence of how young they are; only very young endermen have eyes that bright and glowing. "***You should stay away from that creature. You're odd too, but you're not so frightening or strange.***"

He pulls at the hem of his shirt. “I’ll stay away. I try to do that, anyway.”

“ ***Good,*** ” the enderman says, and he can see them nodding. “ ***Be safe, please. Don’t go in the trees on your own. Stay with your family...*** ”

He nods as well.

He’s not surprised when the younger enderman just chirps and then melts into the darkness.

The warning echoes in his head, intertwining with Dream’s unintelligible voice.

Chapter End Notes

have a good rest of your day my friends!! <3

it won't let me heal, it tells us what's real / there is no truth there

Chapter Notes

what's this?? an update that isn't a month after the last??? what a concept.

i'm getting my writing energy back. it's finally climbing back into my body like i'm a cool mech

we're getting into... new things. new content. new themes. new perspectives. exciting!
<3

warning for minor violence, past (attempted) drowning, a minor reference to self harm, and past abuse. also mild transphobia at the end.

title from razors edge by digital daggers

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Tommy isn't really having one of his better days.

His nightmares are back.

That... kind of implies they really went away. They didn't. He still had at least one every night when he was "better".

But the really bad ones are back. The ones that make him wake up in a panic, gasping and on the edge of a scream, shaking so hard it hurts his whole body.

The shaking doesn't stop until well into the morning.

He's been having nightmares about being drowned. Which is kind of stupid, because he didn't even realize how bad that was for *months*. It didn't freak him out for a while.

And then he started thinking about it *too much*.

He can't remember why Dream did it. If there was even a real reason.

He just knows he woke up from an uneasy sleep to the cold ocean lapping at his knees, and Dream's hand wrapped *tightly* in his hair.

"Wh-?" Half of a questioning sound managed to leave Tommy's mouth before his face was shoved into the water.

He was barely half awake, but the water and the salt stinging his eyes shot him into pure, adrenaline-fueled panic; he grabbed at the wet sand and tried to scream, though it wasn't a

great idea. The sea invaded his mouth and nose and he choked on it, unable to get away from it and find air again.

He tried hard to pull himself free from the hand holding his hair, the other braced between his wings, but it didn't serve him at all; Dream has always been stronger than him, even when he wasn't halfway to starving and barely awake.

He's not sure how long he was under the water. It couldn't have been long, because he didn't die.

But when Dream finally dragged him up, he was more than a wreck.

The rough sand and the shells within had cut his cheeks, nose, and forehead, and blood streamed down his skin, along with a disturbing amount coming up as he coughed. Saltwater morphed the metallic flavor into something even worse, and even when his mouth was clear and he could breathe again, he couldn't taste anything else. His whole head was wet and his hair stuck up in unruly clumps from sleeping and being held down.

Dream had released his hair, and Tommy scrambled away as far as he dared, still coughing. Everything ached-- his chest, his mouth, his face, his head, his legs, equally as scraped and damaged...

He curled up, wrapping his wings and arms around himself, protecting his body as best he could. Sleep still tugged at the far corners of his mind, some whisper of dreamland still around, but adrenaline silenced most exhaustion.

"Wh-why did you...?" He rasped out after a while, staring through damp hair and dry feathers at Dream, sitting on his own knees in the sand, presumably staring away.

He didn't say anything. Not a single word.

A few minutes passed silently, before he got up and just... *left*.

He left Tommy sitting on the dry sand, coughing on lingering blood and seawater.

In the moment, he hadn't realized what happened. He was confused and exhausted and was far more focused on remembering that he could *breathe*.

But looking back, it's fairly obvious.

Dream tried to drown him. It would've worked to kill him, too; there was surely pure intention behind it. Whatever changed his mind could have easily not happened. He could have lost his last life to the merciless sea.

(He was uneasy about the beach for a while.)

Tommy thinks he's going to drive himself crazy trying to figure out why Dream hated him. *Hates* him, rather, because he's sure he still does. Perhaps even more so, now, since he ran away, got well out of his reach. Since he found some way to keep himself mostly safe.

Mostly.

Safe *enough* , at least.

He doesn't feel as safe anymore, now that the bad nightmares are back. Not even when he sleeps with his scythe within reach and his family close to him, close enough that they'd hear it, if anything happened.

The windows in their room can't even open, but he's still halfway tempted to drag the dressers in front of them.

Not that Dream would be stopped by that, he supposes.

For a few days, he tries to stay up later. Just in case.

It doesn't last very long. He gets tired too early in the night, and ends up dozing off every time. And of course, that means the nightmares wake him up before long.

And then he just lays in bed for the next few hours, too tense to sleep anymore but too afraid to get up.

Suffice to say, he's exhausted. But it's fine. He's going to be fine. If anything did happen, he's well protected. Techno is a light sleeper, someone could make noise miles away and he'd hear it, and that would be the end of any problems.

He's safe. Probably as safe as he *could* be, in this situation.

He carries a weapon wherever he goes, just in case. Not always his scythe, but a knife, at least. Techno finally let him have one.

("I'm goin' to be real blunt here." Techno placed a shining, golden knife on the table in front of him. "You can have this, but if you start hurtin' yourself again, I'm goin' to take it away.")

Tommy swallowed nervously, both shamed and excited. "Understood.")

Tommy doesn't stray very far from the cabin, either. He's so nervous that getting farther than a few dozen feet will expose him to every horror imaginable.

Dream probably knows he couldn't take on his family again. Phil killed him pretty goddamn effortlessly, and everyone else would do the same, he's sure.

(Unbidden, his mind gives him the image of Dream breaking Niki's neck one evening, and it makes him so nauseous he can't eat dinner.

The worst part is that he'd *definitely* do it.)

But one day, he makes the mistake of doing just that.

He's not sure what distracted him. He saw something colorful through the trees, and he was comfortable and happy enough (after winning a snowball fight against Techno, that was

admittedly unfair because Tommy stole his glasses) that he just followed it.

He weaves through the trees on foot, and in a short time he emerges into a clearing. A little round space with dull grass, stripped away by the steady sun and rising temperatures.

And at the foot of a scraggly pine, there are *flowers* .

Bright, bright purple flowers. Pretty things, a line of star-shaped blooms along a thin green stem, hanging like bells.

Tommy kneels down next to them and inspects them curiously. They might be poisonous. They're small and unassuming, but most poisonous plants are.

They smell nice. Fresh and sweet in a way that compliments the crisp cold.

Maybe he can pick a few and ask about them? That'll probably be fine. Techno knows a lot about flowers, he might know these.

Gingerly, he covers his hand with his sleeve and reaches in to gently pick one of the delicate flowers. His fingers are just reaching the thin stem when someone speaks.

"Might wanna be careful there, little bird."

He jerks back as if the flower burnt him, eyes widening, mouth going dry.

He's behind me.

"Don't know if you know it, but those can blind you. It's pretty powerful stuff." The snow and frosted grass crunch under Dream's boots. "And I wouldn't want you to damage those pretty blue eyes."

Tommy can't breathe. He's so close, he feels like he can feel him breathing.

His fingers fumble towards his knife, tucked inside the pocket of his pants. He has his scythe as well, but it's on his back, and he doesn't think he can reach up that far right now.

Dream steps around him to come to his side, and kneels down as well. "Hey," he says, friendly as can be. "I was *wondering* when you'd finally come back to me."

Oxygen returns to him in a sharp inhale, and he draws his knife. "I'm not," his voice comes out a little croaky. "I'm never going with you again."

"Sure, little bird. I'll believe it when I see it." Dream plucks the flowers and quickly strips the blooms from the stem. "I've been lonely, y'know. You were pretty good company."

Tommy stares as he crushes the flowers in his fingers, leaving blue-purple stains. "I don't care. I don't want to k-keep you company." His hands are trembling. His muscles are locked. "*Leave* me alone."

He shrugs. “I mean, I could definitely do that. But I decided that I *like* you, and that means it’s kinda hard to leave you alone.”

He’s not sure why his stomach gives a hot jolt of revulsion.

I like you.

He holds his knife so tightly it hurts, trying to will his body into a less tense state. He needs to be ready to defend, if he needs to. He’s sure he will.

“I’ll kill you.” His voice is stronger now. “I don’t c-care if you like me. I’ll kill you, o-or I’ll — I’ll scream. Techno w-will hear, he’s n-not—”

“Aw, your stutter’s getting bad again.” The comment makes his cheeks redden. “That’s a shame, I thought you’d gotten over it. Eh, just another thing to work on, I guess.”

Tommy abruptly scrambles to his feet, and begins walking backwards, to the path away from the clearing. He needs to get away. His muscles already ache from tension.

“Little bird,” Dream calls in a sing-song, both warning and amused. “We already figured out how running away goes for you. Do you really want me to break your wing again? When it’s just healed?”

His stomach jolts again. His now-sound wing twitches and gives a hum of phantom pain.

No, no, no.

“I’m not- not going *anywhere* w-with you,” he manages to get out. His breathing is too fast. “I-I... I’m smarter now, I kn-know you were really *trying* to- to hurt me. And I’m n-not letting you do it again.”

Dream rises to his feet as well, putting his hands in his pockets. “Is that what you’ve been telling yourself?” He asks, false curiosity dripping from his words and cutting holes in Tommy’s resolve. It’s never good when he talks like that. “That you didn’t deserve all of that? That it wasn’t all for your own *good*?”

“I-it wasn’t,” Tommy says as firmly as he can. His fingers fumble to put his knife away, and he draws his scythe instead. The weight of the netherite is instantly comforting. “I fucked up, s-sure. But you weren’t hurting me be- because of that. Y-you were hurting me because you *wanted* to.”

“Really? Come on now, Tommy.” He laughs, short and full of malicious amusement. “I don’t like hurting people, I really don’t. You’re the one who forced my hand, since you wouldn’t just *behave*.”

He rubs his thumb against the handle of his scythe. “I didn’t *force your hand*, ” he spits out, stutter gone, the terror disappearing. “I’m a kid. I didn’t do *anything* to deserve all th-the shit you did to me.”

Dream tilts his head. His hand drifts up to rest on his own shoulder, brushing his fingers over the handle of his axe. "If you were just a *kid*, Tommy, your best friend wouldn't have okay'd your exile. Obviously, he knows that you're not just a *harmless* kid. And so do I. You were getting better, but then you had to *run away*. I'm going to have to fix your behavior again."

He rocks back on his heels. He's so tense that he can't stop shaking. "I'm not-- I'm not going to go with you," he says as strongly as he can. "My behavior doesn't n-need to be fixed."

Dream laughs again, drawing his axe and swinging it lightly. "Oh, it definitely does. You've attacked me, you've run away from someone trying to help you, you just don't *listen*. I don't know why your family tolerates you."

Tommy bites into the inside of his lip. He should just run. But Dream is faster than him and he's so tense he's worried that he won't be able to run or fly or anything. "Because they *care* about me," he says, a little bit hysterical. "You couldn't f-fix me even if you tried. Y-you're *so* much worse than me."

He huffs, and steps forward.

The tension snaps at the simple movement, and some kind of old training from a thousand years ago (Techno teaching him how to swordfight?) kicks in.

He steadies himself, his foot balancing on the hard earth, and swings his scythe. Dream isn't close enough to him for the blade to connect, but he still steps back in alarm, the netherite just brushing him.

Tommy bares his teeth in a hysterical smile and turns on his heel, taking off into the woods. He just needs to run. If he gets back to the cabin quick enough, he'll be safe. Techno and Phil can protect him.

Dream is following him, feet cracking through the frosted grass and dead leaves. He's silent, not even breathing heavy. (What *is* he, seriously?)

Tommy keeps running. He's not whatever the *fuck* Dream is, so he *is* breathing heavily. Adrenaline is good for keeping him on his feet. And he's good at running.

Is Techno still outside?

He should be, he wasn't away from the cabin for more than maybe fifteen minutes. Techno was going through the firewood pile, taking out rotting wood and splitting larger logs. He should still be busy.

He's almost out of the treeline.

Dream grabs his left arm and jerks him back. A choked shout leaves him as he stumbles, swinging his scythe uncoordinatedly behind him.

"If you're not going to cooperate, I don't have any problems dragging you away," he says in an odd, soft voice. "Come on, little bird. Don't make me *hurt* you."

“Let me go ,” Tommy says in a panic, trying to jerk his arm away from his grasp. His voice cracks when he shouts, “Techno! *Techno* , help me--!”

A gloved hand clasps over his mouth, trying to keep him silent. Immediately, he bites into it, teeth sinking through the leather and then through skin.

Dream’s hand spasms, but he doesn’t pull away.

Tommy bites harder, raising his free hand to dig his nails into his wrist. This can’t happen again. He can’t do this, he *can’t* .

Dream finally draws his hand away, cursing. “Stop it,” he spits. “You little brat. Don’t make me break something, *sweetheart* .”

“ *Techno!* ” He screams, jerking away from the masked man and stumbling towards the treeline.

He growls behind him and grabs the back of his cloak. Without even thinking, he undoes the clasp on the garment, jolting forwards once freed.

“You’re forcing me to be a lot more mean than I need to be,” Dream spits. “Do I have to pull my last card, Tommy?”

“I don’t care!” He screams, accidentally knocking his shoulder into a tree and stumbling. “You’re not t-taking me away again!”

“Would you prefer it if I went after your family?”

Tommy freezes, clutching his hurt shoulder. His feathers and hair are sticking up all over, he notices, as a cold wind blows over him.

Dream tilts his head. He has no idea if he’s smiling, but he feels the weight of his eyes on his body. “I have other plans,” he says. “I wasn’t going to go through with them unless you didn’t cooperate. But if you insist on running away from me...”

His wings spasm and he grips his own shirt. “What?” He asks, a little dumbstruck.

“Either you come with me,” he starts slowly, “or I’ll make a deal with your family. With Techno, probably. And, you know... he’d do *anything* to keep all of you safe.”

The implication settles over Tommy like fresh, heavy snow. He’s not sure what *exactly* it implies, but it’s not good.

Techno would do just about *anything* , he’s sure. He’s a force to be reckoned with, when he’s protecting his family...

“I already planned to try it,” Dream says casually, putting his hands in his pocket. “So, if you want to keep running...” He nods towards the cabin. “Be my guest, little bird. Gamble with your family’s lives.”

Tommy feels like he's being choked to death. This isn't *fair*. Going with Dream would fucking *kill* him, he wouldn't survive, he would either kill himself or break down entirely.

But-- Techno could easily end up in a terrible situation, just like his. Not exactly the *same*, he supposes; Techno is stronger and smarter and less *vulnerable* than him. But it could easily be terrible in another way.

It's not fair.

Dream doesn't attack him. He stands still across from him, seemingly casual.

"You're... y-you're just letting me go?" Tommy asks dubiously, glancing back at the cabin. "Because you c-could just go after Techno?"

"Yeah, I mean... it's not ideal, you'd be a lot easier... but if you want to escape again, I'm not gonna stop you. I have backup plans."

He's not one to question a free pass, especially when he's full of trembling panic and ebbing adrenaline.

He snatches his fallen cloak from the ground, and runs towards the cabin at full speed.

He's not even conscious of stumbling up the stairs and shoving open the front door, but he *is* aware of getting inside and slamming it behind him. His fingers fumble to lock it.

"Tommy?" Gentle hands take hold of his arm, and he has to work hard to stop himself from screaming in panic. Niki touches his mouth, and she makes a low, worried sound. "There's blood on your teeth-- what *happened*?"

He's breathing so heavily and unevenly his chest aches. He feels sick again. "I-- Dream was h-here-- i-is here, I guess--"

Niki chirps in alarm, and she cups his cheek. "Oh," she whispers. "Techno--"

"I heard him," Techno says firmly, cutting around them to get to the door. "Where?"

"In th-the t-trees," Tommy manages to say. His teeth are chattering. "Be careful, I-I... he said he'd g-go after you if I d-d-didn't--"

"I'm not goin' out," he soothes. "Don't worry, I'm stayin' in here. What was he doin' out here, anyway?"

Niki makes comforting noises and gently guides Tommy towards the nearby couch. He allows it, mostly because he's afraid his knees will give out if he keeps standing. "I-I don't really- he w-was trying to t-take me away again, b-but I didn't let him..."

Techno goes to the windows and peers through the wooden blinds. His tail flicks back and forth in a distracting movement. "Can't really see him now," he says quietly. "I'll go out and check everything over in a while..."

“Why are you bleeding?” Niki asks gently, using her grey sleeve to brush blood from his lips. “Did he hurt you?”

Tommy winces-- he didn't realize his lip was slightly sore, probably from biting Dream so hard. “He didn't, I... I bit him.”

Techno lets out an abrupt laugh, nearly a cackle. Niki laughs too, though softer. “Good job,” she says with amusement. “He deserved it. But you're not hurt?”

He shakes his head. “Not really. I f-feel like I n-need to sleep now, though...”

She pets his cheek with her thumb. “Makes sense, you don't look too good. You've earned some rest.”

Tommy's eyes slide closed and he leans into her hand. The gentle touch is soothing, and he's sure his teeth are going to stop clattering together soon.

He can't stop thinking about Dream's threat towards his brother.

“And, you know... he'd do *anything* to keep all of you safe.”

What kind of backup plan does he *have* ? What would he even do? What does Techno have to trade away in favor of their safety? Dream probably doesn't want riches, or any sort of material good.

But he couldn't just isolate Techno like he did to him, it wouldn't work with the differences in their personalities. Techno would take isolation in stride; he doesn't need comfort and contact nearly as much as Tommy does.

Sure, he'd crack eventually. But it would take more time than he thinks Dream could put into this. He *thrives* in isolation and solitude.

Then what kind of deal could he even *make* with him? What could he give him?

He doesn't know, and he has no idea if he ever will.

-

The trees rustle and flutter in the thin arctic breeze. The branches of these trees are spiny and slender, but he's not big enough to break them, if he's careful.

The branches crackle under Fundy's boots regardless of his weight. He grips onto the tree trunk, his leather gloves creaks, and he bares his teeth, drawing in a sharp breath. He's close to falling, but he's able to keep himself from tumbling to the ground.

Footsteps crunch through the frozen grass and leaves. He scrambles closer to the trunk again and stares through the gaps in the needles. Who is it? God, he doesn't want to get caught doing this again--

A flash of blonde hair makes him tense further, covering his mouth to muffle his breathing. Is it--?

Grey feathers.

He breathes out sharply and presses his hand further over his mouth. Philza or Tommy, then. He has no idea how they would react, but it's not Dream or Quackity, so it's-- good. It's much less dangerous, at least.

His left eye twitches aggressively along the scar and he presses his back against the tree.

The footsteps keep walking past him. He's pretty sure he hasn't been found, which is good.

But he wants to know what's going on. Which means he's going to have to climb more, carefully finding his way through the trees without being seen.

Easy, then.

He jumps from his spindly spruce, to a firmer, wider birch. The branch he lands on doesn't crackle, though a few leaves fall from it.

He peers through the needles again. Blue fabric flashes, along with white fur. The flash of a green jewel. A golden chain.

Grey and tan wings, tipped with black.

Tommy .

Fundy follows him through the trees.

He's not being as careful as he should be, because he's-- *excited* , he thinks? Maybe. He's not sure why he'd be excited. He knows Tommy has been out here, he's seen him before. But they haven't spoken or anything; he hasn't been brave enough.

He has no idea, but he wants to follow him regardless. He wants to know what he's doing.

Tommy pauses in a small clearing, and Fundy hesitates at the edge of the trees to watch him.

He watches as he kneels down near some flowers, pretty blue-purple ones. Nothing really happens-- he's just looking at the flowers, reaching in to pick them..

And then Dream emerges from the trees across the clearing.

Fundy grips onto the tree, covering his mouth to muffle his gasp.

Tommy doesn't see him. He's facing the trees that Fundy is in, and focused on the flowers.

Should he-- should he say something? He could! He could yell, he could just-- could just yell and keep Dream away from Tommy. He could.

He could...

Would that do anything?

He doesn't know what Dream is really doing here. What he did to Tommy. He definitely did something-- he isn't *stupid*-- but he's not sure what.

Dream says something, but he can't hear it over the rush of blood in his ears. He's getting closer to Tommy, armed with an axe and knives strapped to his belt and one of his thighs and a sword hanging from his waist.

Fundy bites into his glove to keep from screaming. He should do something. He should just *do* something--

He can't move. Why can't he move? He wants to help. He wants to help. He could do something, he wants to help--

Tommy takes off running with a large weapon in hand, and Dream gives chase.

Fundy follows, dropping down from the trees to scramble along the forest floor. He runs on all fours, shifting further into his fox form, much more able to slip through narrow gaps.

The trees are thinner as they run, and he has to stay closer to the ground to keep hidden.

Though, they seem to be very distracted.

They've stopped at the edge of the treeline, talking to each other with clear agitation. Fundy scrambles up into a tree and observes, ears perked.

Dream aggressively pulls away from where he was holding his hand over Tommy's mouth, cursing loudly. "Stop it," he spits, wiping blood from his hand on his top. "You little *brat* . Don't make me break something, *sweetheart* ."

Tommy stumbles forward, eyes wild in panic. Fundy's heart gives a painful jolt at the expression; it's incredibly familiar. "*Techno!*" He screams, head turned towards the opening in the trees.

Fundy tenses instinctively, gripping the tree trunk with his claws.

He's been very careful to hide from Technoblade, while he's observing them; he can't imagine he'd be welcomed at all, considering the execution.

To be honest, he doesn't *want* to be welcomed. He doesn't deserve it.

Tommy is screaming again. Dream has ripped his blue cloak off, and it lays on the ground in a heap, like a fallen body.

"Would you prefer it if I went after your family?" Dream asks in an odd tone. His axe flashes as he puts it securely on his back again.

Tommy grips onto his own tree, staring at the masked man. He has a scythe in one hand, and the other is wrapped around a branch. He blinks rapidly, like the sun is shining in his eyes.

Fundy sinks down against the birch's trunk, braced against a V-shaped fork in the branches.

His new base is near Dream's. He didn't do that intentionally.

He noticed when he was out hunting.

He nearly ran directly into him, chasing down a rabbit, darting through the thick, dark trees.

One moment, he was alone, and the next--

Dream's intimidating form had emerged from the trees, intimidatingly sharp sword in hand, mask glinting in the low sunlight.

Fundy is sure he squeaked when he scrambled back, seizing his prey and running off before he could be caught.

He hadn't stopped shaking for days. He had buried himself underneath his blankets and cried, unsure of exactly why he was so upset, but aware that he needed to cry.

He had been more careful, after that. He didn't leave his base for a while, but when he did, he cautiously plotted out a path that wouldn't allow them to pass each other. He was tense at almost every moment, clutching his sword, running back home at most sounds.

But he relaxed, and he was able to go back to hunting. To exploring. To spying on anyone he can find, mostly because he's bored, but also out of curiosity.

He's only recently started to spy on Technoblade again. He's been keeping notes on what he sees here; Ranboo, coping with his damaged sight, Tommy and Phil flying between the property and the nearby village, Niki carrying a basket of baked bread between her own home to the cabin.

Technoblade standing in the snow, holding a bloodied pickaxe, with Quackity's body at his feet.

He's glad he didn't see the murder itself. The blood was enough.

"Be my guest, little bird. Gamble with your family's lives."

Fundy jolts at the words, staring at Dream with alarm. *What?* He should have been paying more attention to whatever he was saying to Tommy...

(Is he going to help? He's not sure. But he wants to know.)

Tommy clutches his scythe close. "You're... y-you're just letting me go? Because you c-could just go after Techno?" He asks, glancing through the trees at Technoblade's cabin. His wings are spread out and his feathers are all fluffy in the way that he knows means *fear* in avians.

(Fundy remembers how much Wilbur's wings would get puffy when he was younger. He always thought it was kind of funny, but that was mostly because feathers would fall off of

them and he could chase them as they scattered around the floor.

He's a simple fox, especially back then.)

Dream shrugs. He has a knife in hand, and he's fiddling with it behind his back, turning it between his fingers. "Yeah, I mean... it's not ideal, you'd be a lot easier... but if you want to escape again, I'm not gonna stop you. I have backup plans."

Without hesitation, Tommy snatches up his cloak from the ground and takes off towards the house, running as fast as he can. He's practically flying, wings splayed out and feathers rustling.

Fundy watches from his perch in the tree as he slams the door closed. Snow flutters down from the top of the doorframe.

Dream huffs, laughing quietly, and turns to begin walking through the forest again.

He should head home as well, he supposes.

He hops down from the trees and begins picking his way through the brush. He'll have to hunt on his way; he was going to do it anyway, but he got distracted, so he won't have time when he gets there.

He ends up silently creeping along with Dream, which feels... morbidly funny, for some reason.

--

Dream jams his hands into his pockets and tugs his hood up, covering his cold ears.

You're such a pain, it says cheerfully. **I wasn't going to *do* anything to him.**

He slumps and ducks below a low-hanging tree branch. "Bullshit," he mutters. "I know your plans. You need to accept that you're not getting Tommy back."

It chuckles, low and buzzing in his head. **That's what *you* think, baby boy. I'll get him back soon enough. You won't let me have my favorite victim back, so I have to settle for *someone else*.**

Dream rolls his eyes and moves his hands to scratch at his right wrist. Apparently it's been playing with matches again; he has some minor burns. "Maybe you should settle for starving to death."

You'll die too if I do that.

"Exactly."

He scratches at the burns and glances down at the subtle white marker on the forest trail, keeping himself on the right path.

You're being followed, you know.

He looks back subtly, inspecting the trees. "I don't really care."

It's the little bandit.

"Use people's *names*, for once in your life." There's nothing visibly following him, but he can hear a suspiciously consistent crackle of leaves.

Ugh. I don't remember her name. The little fox girl?

His brows furrow deeply, and he gives a frustrated groan. "That's Fundy, and he's a *boy*. You'd think you'd have learned some basic decency in *not* pointedly misgendering people after all this time."

You're *exhausting* to have as a host.

"You're *exhausting* to be possessed by." He sounds borderline childish, which he'll accept. He's still sixteen, by all logic. "You've literally gotten *my* arms broken while being an asshole, and yet you don't stop. It's kind of hilarious."

While I'm in control, your body is mine.

"Gross," Dream says succinctly.

You know, the bandit could hear you. Someone could figure out you're possessed, and then what would happen?

"Nothing, right? I can't be *un*-possessed, and even if I could, you wouldn't let it happen." He runs his tongue over his teeth.

(He isn't sure when they became so sharp.

But one day, he had looked at himself in the mirror, and saw that his formerly straight, flat teeth are now curved, fanglike, and there was a new gap between two of his top-right teeth.)

I suppose. But people might bother you about it. And that would give me victims... It chuckles. And you don't want that, do you?

He scrunches up his face under his mask. "I don't, but no one knows where I am. On *purpose*."

I bet mom is worried about you.

He winces instinctively, but then grits his teeth in annoyance. "Shut up. Don't talk about her." He shifts his hand up to scratch at his neck, feeling like spiders are crawling up his back.

Oh, that's an especially *sore* spot, isn't it, baby boy? Do you miss her?

He digs his nails into the back of his neck. He hasn't drawn blood, yet.

He decides to ignore it for now.

I don't know why I ask. You're full of too many feelings for everyone, aren't you? You miss your brothers, and your boyfriend, and all your friends. I liked some of your friends, honestly. Especially that half-breed... I bet I could have gotten a lot from him.

Fuck you, fuck you, fuck you, he thinks bitterly.

He catches sight of another marker, and begins walking faster.

I wanted to give you some time in control, but if you're going to act like a child about it, I can take over again.

He scratches below of his ears and then winces as he catches an already roughened patch. "Does it even matter? You never let me be in control for very long. I mostly just wanted to get you away from Tommy." He pauses. "And Ranboo, too."

I thought you'd forget he's there. I wanted to maybe go back and say hello. You miss him too, don't you? He was so sweet when he was younger.

"Shut up," he says flatly. "You're not going back."

Ugh.

It goes quiet for the moment, so Dream goes back to focusing on his walk home.

It's really not a *home*. It's a cold, empty base, with little personality and little comfort.

(He had managed to salvage some stuff from his old house, but... last time he was in control, he found the remains of the few items burned to ash in the fireplace.)

But it's somewhere to sleep, and somewhere to eat. And somewhere to keep it away from people.

And that's all he really needs...

Chapter End Notes

fun update: i've added my dear friend DeathSquiggles as a co-author of this series!

she's a giant part of why this au is so complicated and detailed, and she's helped with lots of plot stuff <3 and also tolerates/enables *so much* brainrot. she also has some snow au stuff of her own that she's working on that y'all will see sooner or later, so :eyes:

give her some love and check out her fics if you like; her writing slaps.

don't remember it, don't return to it

Chapter Notes

vibrates REAL DREAM CHAPTER!!!

thats right. its not a plot twist anymore, its in the tags and we get this boy for a whole chapter. fuck yeah.

requisite dove life update:

i got referred for surgery finally!!! i'll be getting surgery soon!!! this is very important because Oh My God my pain and general issues are So Bad right now lmao.

that's why it took A Month for me to write this. it actually took me several months to write this chapter, it's been in progress for Ages. there's actually a b-side drabble in this chapter, and the beginning part is from an old drabble from my tumblr i never posted here! it's been a process lol

warning for violence, implied sexual assault, mild transphobia, *lots* of themes of abuse, minor self-harm, psychological stuff vis a vis possession and demons being awful, and generally just Not Good times. it's heavy!!

title from honey i'm home by ghost!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

"I'm going to take a walk," Dream says a little abruptly, getting up from his chair and stretching his arms up. "Yell for me if he wakes up, okay?"

Purpled gives him a wary glance, eyes lidded as he tries to keep reading the heavy book on his lap. It's past his usual bedtime, and it's obvious in how subdued he is. "M'kay," he nods, blinking heavily. "Don't stay out for too long."

"I won't," he promises, ruffling up the boy's fluffy bedhead. He gives a sleepy mumble, obviously a little bit annoyed, but leans up into his hand almost needily regardless. "How about you go brush your teeth while I'm out?"

He whines. "No oo ," he groans, setting his book aside and slumping off the bed. "Okay, fine."

Dream huffs a laugh and nods, watching for just a moment as he shuffles to the bathroom. He pauses to tug Sapnap's blankets up to his chin, wanting to keep him comfortable and warm even if he's sick, before grabbing his sword and leaving the house.

The post-storm summer air is oddly cool yet humid, and it brushes over his face like a moist breath. (*Gross.*)

The walk to the tree-line isn't far. The lights of the house brightens the way just enough to see the beaten-down path they walk on every day. With all the rain they've been getting, it's a bright, lush color and the dirt is just slightly damp and soft below his shoes.

He sighs, some of the tension sinking out of his shoulders as he breathes in the cool, damp air. He dislikes spending so much time inside, even if it's for a good reason; he feels so much more alive out in the woods. He hopes Sapnap starts feeling better soon, both for his brothers' sake and his own.

He's not entirely optimistic, he always gets sick around the rainy season, but he can hope. If worse comes to worse, he'll swallow his pride and ask Philza if he knows anything; if anyone knows anything about Nether hybrids around here, it'll be him and Technoblade.

(Seriously, why are there no books about this? Are Nether hybrids *that* rare? Maybe he's an outlier, knowing and being close to three of them.)

He makes his way around the treeline, in a rough circle around the house. The path is familiar; he usually walks it a few times a day, especially when the monsters are feeling more bold.

They're not that way tonight, though, which is probably for the best. He's too tired to fight, after a week of worrying over Sapnap. He only came outside to clear his head before he goes to sleep.

The humidity seems to break for a minute. Dream exhales slowly, tilting his head as the cool air brushes over his cheeks. It's soothing, relaxing.

That's much of why he doesn't notice the white eyes watching him from the brush, nor the black, insubstantial fingers curling around the branches, across the path.

No, Dream's attention is solely on the house, wanting to be aware in case his youngest brother calls for help.

He's been hesitant to leave Purpled alone with Sapnap, even asleep, because he doesn't want to put too much responsibility on him. He's *very* mature for only ten, but at the same time, Dream knows the long-term effects of assuming maturity means you're ready to take care of another person. You don't take on responsibility for a nine-year-old when you're barely eleven without learning that.

But this should be fine. He's not too far away.

He yawns, stretching his free arm up to try and work out a kink in his back from sleeping on the floor. He hadn't wanted to leave the younger two alone, but he couldn't curl up next to Sapnap in case whatever he has is contagious, and Purpled doesn't like being cuddled, he never has. Even holding hands seems to make him jumpy sometimes.

So he's been sleeping on their floor in a pile of blankets. His spine and hips are *not* thanking him.

He's halfway around the treeline, where the faint path dips under the stretching canopy of a few tall trees. It's where they spar on good, warm days, evident in how crushed and pale the sparse grass is. At night, it's the darkest area in the immediate surroundings.

He can't see anything now, though; maybe the mobs are off bothering some other poor souls. He holds tighter on his sword regardless.

A stick cracks in the brush, off to his right, and Dream's head snaps towards it. He passes the dark space without taking his alert eyes off of the spot where the sound came from.

Something bodily *slams* into him the left.

He lets out a shout of alarm and swings his sword, trying to knock the thing attacking him away, but it digs sharp claws into his arm, dragging them down his skin.

He bites down his scream and jabs its black, horned head with his sword, the angle awkward and not quite right for it. Blood pours down his arm, and his long sleeve is shredded from the claws.

He has no clue what the hell it is, but it's much, much bigger than him. He's tall for his age, he always has been, but it towers a good two or three feet over him, even hunched over to claw and snap at him with oddly straight and long teeth.

He half-stumbles, half-jumps away from it, guarding himself with his sword. The thing is snarling, like nothing he's ever heard before, and when he slashes at it, no blood is drawn, just wisps of shadow.

"What the *fuck*?" He asks, voice high with borderline hysteria. Perhaps reasonably, he does not get a reply.

It just... laughs?

It *laughs*, and its clawed hands grab at his arms and he gasps when they sink through his shirt, cutting deeply into his skin.

"Let go of me," he says, now purely hysterical, trying to raise his sword to stab the thing. It's hard, his fingertips are tingling from the deep wounds, but he's still fighting as much as he can.

"Dream?" Purpled's voice calls from the porch. He can see his figure ringed in the light, ears drooping, tail twitching near his legs. "What's going on?"

Dream chokes down a curse, as the creature's head whips towards his brother's soft voice.

"Go back inside!" he calls a little too harshly. "I've got it!"

His brother doesn't say anything, but he can see him watching. He knows he can see what's going on, the kid can see in the dark really well. And he doesn't want him to see this, especially because he *knows* blood scares him.

He bites into his tongue and, using the creature's attention being distracted, slams the hilt of his sword between its eyes with a well-placed jump.

It howls, and he can feel its odd skull... *dent* .

It makes his stomach sweep suddenly, disgusted by his own strength. He stares for a long minute, as the creature clutches its head with four spindly hands, letting out a ghastly, pained moan.

He can hear Purpled chirp loudly in alarm, and it jolts him back into the situation.

Dream jumps back, slashing the sword across its chest and then plunging it into its emaciated stomach.

It lets out a strangled sound and stumbles back, falling onto the grassy floor. It sprawls out on its back, four arms and crooked legs all awry. Its white eyes roll in its head.

As a last precaution, he slits its throat with his sword and then kicks its head, hard. More of that shadowy blood leaks out, and it goes still against the ground.

God, what *was* that? The blackened form, horns, tail, and white, pupil-less eyes makes him think *demon* , but why would there be a demon *here* , of all places?

(Well, there's a *half* -demon somewhat nearby, but that's different.)

He looks at his slashed arms and shoulders. He can barely feel the deep cuts, his body full of adrenaline from the swift fight, but none of them look good; black goo marks his grey sleeves, along with way too much blood.

He swallows and shakes his head. "Fuck," he mutters.

He walks back to the house, refusing to look back at the creature, even as the back of his neck prickles, as if he's being watched.

Purpled is sitting on the porch bench, curled up with his tail wrapped around his legs, his violet, glowing eyes locked on the floor. He looks terrified, his shoulders subtly shaking and glowing particles floating around his body, especially around his face.

"What was that?" he asks, and he flinches at how soft his voice is. "You're *bleeding* ."

Blood drips from his fingertips onto the porch, and he sighs. "I don't know, some kind of monster. I'm all good." He cradles his arm against his chest and wraps it up in the bottom of his shirt, so it won't drip on the floor inside. "Go to bed, I'll be there in a minute."

Purpled scrunches up his face and his ears twitch up. "Can I help you?"

Dream shakes his head, wrapping the fabric tighter around his arm. "Nah, I'm alright, kiddo. Go ahead, I'll be fine."

He uncurls and stands up, incredibly tall even at this age. "...okay," he mutters. "Clean those really good, okay?"

He smiles weakly. "Yeah, I will. Don't worry."

They go inside, and Purpled glances black at him as he steps into his bedroom.

Dream sighs, shoulders slumping completely. He's still tense with stress and adrenaline, but he's starting to feel the pain now.

He pulls his shirt off. He inspects the clawmarks with dismay; he had hoped it wasn't too damaged, but the sleeves are entirely shredded and it's so soaked with blood that he's unsure if he'll be able to wash it. There's blood on the shoulders, too, where it clawed him the second time.

He groans and throws it into the trash. He has other shirts, it's fine.

He slinks to the bathroom, grabbing potions on the way.

He uncorks the healing potion. He wets the cloth with it and dabs at the deep, black-edged clawmarks. Usually, he'd dilute it, but these aren't normal cuts. He'll need the full effect.

They burn like fucking *fire*, and tears pour down his cheeks. He has to bite his lip to the point of bleeding so he doesn't cry out or just scream.

God, this sucks.

Once they're clean-- still blackish, but otherwise clean, he can't wash the black stuff away-- he wraps his arms securely in bandages. They're covered and he doesn't want to look at them again.

He stares at himself in the mirror.

His skin looks odd and pale, and he's been scratching at his acne. He has very dark circles under his eyes; stress seems to age him an extra two years, he even looks slightly wrinkled. His hair is a wreck. He's been biting his bottom lip a lot, too, out of anxiety--

For a terrifying second, he sees *something* behind him. A dark, black figure with white eyes and sharp, large teeth, bared in a grin. It's black, long fingers rest on his arms, right where his bandages are.

"What?" He whips around, reaching for his still-bloodied sword, resting on the counter.

There's nothing there. But he swears he saw it.

He swallows.

He quickly cleans his sword. He hurries to his room to pull on a new shirt, and then creeps into the younger boys' bedroom.

Sapnap is awake, if only barely. There are sparks on his bangs (he hopes they don't catch the pillow...) and his eyes are glowing like white-yellow embers. He's clinging to a black-and-yellow plush dragon, which makes his heart ache. He got him that ages ago, when he was only eleven or twelve.

"Hey," Dream says softly, sitting down on his bed at his side and pushing back his dark hair. He's not sweating at all, which worries him for a second; he keeps forgetting he has a fever. "How're you feeling?"

He shrugs, leaning into his hand, glowing eyes closing with a flutter. "M'okay," he mumbles. "He said you're hurt..."

He shakes his head and strokes his hair gently. "Nah, I'm okay. Just a scratch." His arm throbs and his shoulders ache, but he's not about to tell his sick little brother that.

"You were bleeding a lot," his youngest brother mumbles from his bed. He's sitting with one of those big magic books he found in the library on his lap, fiddling with the ribbon marker at the top. "I was worried."

He chuckles and rolls his eyes at the tired concern. "I'm fine, guys. You can go to sleep, I'm gonna lay down too."

He receives almost matching mumbles, making him laugh more, but they both settle back into bed. He tucks both of them into their blankets, pressing kisses to the tops of their heads.

"Night, you two." Dream says softly, as he gets comfortable in his own blankets. His sword is within inches of his fingers.

Sapnap lets out a rattling breath, low and grinding like an actual blaze (that was something he had to get used to when they were younger) and Purpled makes a familiar series of sleepy little enderman sounds.

He stares into the darkness around them. Nothing is wrong. The creature was scary and not at all normal, but he doesn't think it'll happen again.

His eyes slide closed, his fingers still close to his sword.

He rests his head on his pillow, curling his hurt arm to his chest.

Just as his eyelids close, he sees a dark, curled, tall figure in the small gap between the door and its frame.

He jolts back into a sitting position and grips his weapon.

What?

"What's that?" Purpled asks sleepily. "In the... the doorway..."

Dream stares at the door. The figure doesn't move, simply sitting there, staring at him with an unsettling, white smile and equally blank eyes.

He swallows thickly. "What do you see?" He responds with a question of his own, refusing to break eye contact with the creature. It's undoubtedly the same thing he fought outside, and the same thing that was behind him in the bathroom...

"A creature," he replies casually, sitting up in bed. He gives a quiet yawn and he can hear him stretch, either his shoulders or back cracking as he does so. "Did an enderman get into the house again...? They can't undo the locks..."

"No, I don't think it's an enderman," he says softly. The creature's smile seems to widen, and he pulls his sword closer. "Lay back down, kiddo. I've got this handled."

"Mhm, okay." Purpled lays back down immediately, tugging his blankets up. He's too sleepy to be persistent about whatever he sees; he likely won't even remember it when he's conscious again. He's quietly thankful for how sleep muddles his curious little brother's thoughts. "G'night, Dream."

"Goodnight," he says, barely above a breath.

The creature is still staring at him. It tilts its head, unnaturally long neck twisting as it does so. It's crouching like a gargoyle, long legs tucked under its arms, it's hands dangling between its thighs. All he can see of them is the glint of shiny claws. The only consistent movement is the slow flick of its tail, just visible behind it.

Dream's muscles are tense. His jaw aches already from his teeth gritting together. The scratches on his arm sting, the pain as fresh as it was when they were first inflicted.

What is this thing?

He can't go to sleep now. He's terrified that if he looks away, whatever it is will attack his brothers. One of them is sick, just yesterday he was barely able to keep himself conscious long enough to eat. The other is *ten* and, while *competent*, is still weak in the way that his age always offers.

" *What are you?* " he asks, again no louder than his breathing.

It's grin only seems to widen, stretching *far* beyond what would be possible on a human.

He shudders.

It raises a hand to wave at him, a mockingly demure side-to-side motion. It's fingers are long and crooked, and it's claws are at least an inch long.

And then it moves. His breath catches and he raises his sword, but it doesn't advance on him; instead, it rises into a standing position and disappears back into the darkness.

-

Dream wakes up with a splitting headache. For a long moment, he's completely disoriented; the room is lit by bright sunlight leaking through the parted curtains, and it slices like a knife into his eyes and then right into his brain.

He groans and covers his face. Oh god, that's terrible.

"Hey, sleeping beauty's awake," Sapnap says casually, though with a deep, scratchy quality from his illness. "About time."

He shakes his head and tries to take stock of what's going on. He's sitting slumped against a bed, presumably Sapnap's, and he must have just dozed off at some point in the night.

He definitely didn't sleep enough, his brain feels all heavy and his thoughts are slow. Ugh, he's going to feel like shit all day...

The face of that *thing* flashes into his mind and he abruptly remembers why he was up late in the first place. The wounds on his arms sting with sharp pain as he jerks back from the side of the bed and scrambles for his sword.

He can't find it. *Where is his sword?!*

He can't find it, so he hurries up to his feet and turns his attention to his brothers. Sapnap is safely in bed, but Purpled-- he could *see* that creature-- he could be hurt--

He's not in bed, which causes a stab of pure terror, but when he whips around to Sapnap's bed again, he feels that stab be soothed by a relief so sweet it's like a drug.

Both of his brothers are sitting on the bed, Sapnap with a cup of tea in his hands and Purpled with one of his books and that somewhat-ratty little grey blanket he likes.

They're both looking at him with concern, which feels a little ridiculous in this situation. When he passed out after some kind of demon-monster- *thing* got into their house.

Dream lets out a shaky breath, sitting down on the bed with his hands trembling. "Sorry, I- uh, I had a pretty bad nightmare, I guess I was just... c-confused." It feels wrong to lie, but what else can he do? How could he explain the panic?

Sapnap looks at him for a long moment, dimly-glowing eyes narrowed, brows furrowed. He can practically see his brain, still drowning in illness, trying to figure out what his problem could possibly be.

He seems to discard it. His hands shake slightly when he brings his mug up to sip from it. "You look like you were really out," he says, with remarkable calm for a guy who's been so sick he can barely stay awake for a week.

Purpled looks at him for another long moment, eyes also narrowed, but he shakes his head and looks back down at his book, flipping the pages as he looks for a specific part.

Dream inhales, deep and slow, and runs his hands through his hair. "Yeah, I was... I didn't fall asleep until pretty late, I guess." He's still lying, and he shouldn't be, but again; what else can he do? "How did you two sleep?"

Sapnap offers that he woke up once or twice, but otherwise slept fine. Dream pretends his heart rate doesn't *skyrocket* at the knowledge that he was awake at night, when that *thing* was

presumably still around.

(It's fine. He's fine. He shouldn't worry too much.)

"I slept fine, but I had a weird dream," Purpled offers, a bit uncharacteristically.

Dream smiles, bringing his legs up onto the bed to tuck them under his body. "Yeah? What was weird about it?"

"It was about you," Sapnap offers, before yawning widely and showing off the strange glow inside of his mouth.

"I don't care if you're sick, I *will* push you into the lake--"

"There were just... eyes, everywhere," Purpled interrupts, and it's obvious that whatever was in his dream, it genuinely upset him. His ears are lowered and his eyes are visibly darting around on the pages of his book. "White eyes..." his ears lower further, drooping like a wilting flower, and confusion fills his face.

His eyes move up from his book and fix with characteristic avoidance on Dream's cheek. He can fully appreciate the way they don't reflect light, and his complete lack of pupils.

His gaze drifts to the door. His brows furrow, and a flicker of purple particles appear around his face; it's a clear sign of him feeling anxious.

"Did you get up in the middle of the night?" He asks, not looking away from the door.

Dream looks down at his lap. He's the one avoiding eye contact now. "No, I didn't."

Purpled frowns further. More particles drift around his face and shoulders.

Sapnap looks between them. "What's going on?" His voice cracks a little.

"You're lying," Purpled says flatly. "I can *tell* when you're lying, Dream."

His face goes warm with embarrassment, though dread fills his stomach with ice. The way he looked at the door... the way he dreamed of white eyes... the way that he's obviously worried...

("I can feel people's emotions," a particularly small, seven-year-old Purpled had informed him, sitting cross-legged on their porch bench. "It's an enderman thing.")

"That's pretty neat," Dream replied. "All emotions?"

He nodded. "Mhm. The bigger ones are clearer, but... I can feel all of them. I can see and hear people's thoughts too, sometimes..." His tail swayed in the space underneath the wooden bench. "I can tell you're happy right now. 'Cause..." He furrowed his brow and tilted his head, pupil-less eyes locking on Dream's right ear. "... 'cause your *boyfriend* kissed you."

Dream blushed and put a hand over his face, embarrassed. "Don't look in my thoughts!"

Purpled snickered. “That wasn’t even me *looking* for stuff. It’s pretty obvious.”

“You *little* --” he swiped a hand at the boy’s fluffy blonde hair. He evaded him with a high-pitched, happy screech and scrambled off the bench.)

“I’m not lying,” he says comfortingly, even as there’s a mild trembling in his hands. “What makes you think that?”

Purpled scrunches up his nose. “I can tell something *bad* happened around the door.”

He feels vaguely sick. He had falsely assumed he wouldn’t have any knowledge about what happened.

And yet... he obviously knows *something* .

He swallows the anxiety in his throat. “I had to get up in the middle of the night and check my arm,” he says, trying his best to sound genuine. “It kinda freaked me out. Maybe that’s what it is?”

His brows furrow deeply and he looks down at his lap. “That... might be it,” he concedes hesitantly. “It’s just... really strong...” He can see his tail flick behind him. “I don’t know. Emotion stuff doesn’t make sense sometimes.”

Sapnap frowns deeply. “You *felt* something from him?” He asks. “And what’s with the door?”

Usually, he’s more observant than that. It’s probably the sickness, he supposes.

-

They’re hanging out by the lake today.

Dream can’t really enjoy it. He’s too tired and he feels too sick.

He’s taken up residence on Purpled’s blanket, laying on his back in the shade.

Purpled is next to him, leaning up against the tree shading them, reading. A normal novel, this time. He’s relieved; he doesn’t need the extra danger of a ten year old enderman that knows magic.

He’d usually be in the water with everyone else, but he doesn’t feel like he could handle all the movement.

A shriek of laughter makes him turn his head to see the lake. Wilbur is standing on the shore, soaking wet, shaking out his wings.

The source of the alarm seems to be Techno, who’s grinning so wildly he can see it from his place on the grass.

“He tried to drown me!”

Dream chuckles and lies back on the blanket.

His eyes drift closed. If he takes a nap here, he'll at least have gotten some rest.

For a few weeks now, he's been... *acting weird* . He's not sure if anyone else has noticed, but he's been doing weird things.

He wakes up in places he doesn't remember falling asleep in; on the couch instead of in the bedroom, out in the backyard instead of at the desk. Things in his room are out of order, and his brothers are adamant about not having done it.

Small wounds begin to appear on his body, consistent with a fight. Small cuts and scrapes and bruises. Nothing major, but things he doesn't remember getting.

His weapons are damaged. He can't recall *why* .

He's been skipping meals, and it shows. He's not sure why. He just never seems to be around or *aware* of himself at mealtimes.

He's been missing time. There are whole days where he just... misses *everything* . More than usual.

And... well, he just doesn't feel *right* .

He can't think of what might have caused this. He's not sick, or at least he doesn't *feel* sick.

He hasn't really done anything out of the ordinary. They've been planning his birthday celebrations, but he's happy about that.

"Dream?"

He jolts, opening his eyes, turning his head a little too sharply towards the voice. Pain goes through his neck and he winces, rubbing the back of his head.

Bad smiles down at him. "I'm sorry, I didn't realize you were asleep."

Dream shakes his head minutely, pushing himself into a sitting position. "Nah, it's fine, I was just... thinking," he says vaguely. "What's up?"

His friend sits down on the grass next to the blanket, legs crossed. "I was going to ask you..." he glances at the lake, and then at Purpled, absorbed in his novel.

His white eyes narrow slightly. "Have you done anything risky lately, Dream? Any late night adventures or fighting unknown monsters?"

Unknown monsters.

He shivers a little. "Uh... I guess so, yeah. Just a week ago, I think? I fought this weird thing, it... kinda looked like you, only bigger and a lot less friendly."

Bad laughs, but there's a tone of discomfort in it. "That's what I thought," he mutters, lowering his voice a little further. "I could feel there was another demon around. I guess you scared it off, which is good."

Dream isn't sure he likes the implication that he only scared it. "I killed it," he corrects. "I went pretty overboard, honestly."

He doesn't laugh this time.

He fidgets with the leg of his swim trunks. It's still odd to see his nearly featureless torso, only a hint of definition to his muscles and a scar near his navel.

"You can't really just... *kill* demons, Dream," he says, not meeting his gaze. "You'd have to do a ritual. Odds are it just figured out that you're more trouble than you're worth and moved on."

He feels a disturbing chill despite the warm, late spring air. Not even the sound of his friends laughing where they're playing in the water can warm him. "So... I'm fine, then? Since it's moved on?"

Bad nods and pats his shoulder consolingly. "Yeah, once a demon moves on from you, you're fine. They look for whatever entertains them, but they don't usually like too much challenge."

Dream brings one of his legs to his chest and hugs it. "That makes sense." He stares with a blank gaze at the lake. "Does that apply to you?"

He laughs, genuine this time. "No, I'm a bit better about facing challenges than my demonic relatives." He gets up from the grass and brushes it off his legs. "I just know you're the one who's most likely to run into something like it."

He forces his own laugh. "Yeah, I guess you're right about that."

Bad walks back to the lake, presumably to go back to enjoying the good weather and the water.

A demon. Dream fought a *demon* .

A demon was in his *house* , mere feet from his little brothers. A demon attacked him, leaving blackened goo in his wounds...

He's seen it in the mirror a few times since then. Just lurking behind him, often resting its hands on his shoulders where it scratched him.

But surely that's just paranoia and fear, right? It hurt him pretty badly, so of course he's still scared of it.

That doesn't mean anything. It's not worth bringing up.

The way he's been feeling is just fear as well. He's fine.

Maybe he's just getting sick.

-

"You've been actin' really weird," Techno says, sitting cross-legged underneath the willow in his yard. He's braiding his hair, plucking wildflowers from the grass to add them to it. "You keep almost fallin' asleep on me."

Dream sighs, resting his head on his friend's lap. "I haven't been sleeping well," he admits. "I think I've been sleepwalking?"

"Really?" He glances down, raising his eyebrows. "Have you ever done that before?"

He tries to shrug. "Not really..." He hesitates for a minute. "I keep getting hurt, too. Maybe while I'm sleepwalking..."

Techno hums and ties off his braid. "Do you want me to stay over and make sure you don't wander off?" He asks without any hesitation.

Dream plucks some grass from the ground and rubs it between his fingers. "I don't know," he mumbles. "Would that even be helpful?"

"I dunno, it worked with Tommy. He started to sleepwalk for a while, and Wilbur slept in his room with him. He stopped him from walkin' off, and he eventually stopped." Techno picks another wildflower and pushes it into his hair, just above his ear. "It might help with you."

Dream shrugs again. "I just... worry, a little, because..." he bites his tongue. "I think I get violent, when I sleepwalk."

Techno runs his fingers through his hair now, and he instinctively tenses, before melting against his lap at the familiar contact. "What do you mean?" he asks, full of sincerity.

"I think I've been punching the walls," he admits. "There's marks in my room and in the hallway. I haven't broken anything, it's just..."

"You worry that you're gonna hurt me." He lightly scratches the back of his head and he hums. "I could take you in a fight, even asleep."

He laughs and opens one eye to look up at him. His expression is sincere, because of course it is.

"Maybe if I can't fix it on my own," he concedes. "I just don't want to hurt you."

-

"Ow," Techno complains, rubbing his leg. "There are too many *thorns* over here..."

Dream turns around to walk backwards down the loosely-defined path. "I think you're just bad at avoiding them."

He promptly sticks his tongue out at him. Light filtering through the trees makes the lenses of his black glasses flash. “Well sorry, Dream, I’m not *that* far above them,” he steps over a dense clump of spiked, dry vines. “Not everyone can be *tall* .”

“You could be tall if you weren’t meant to be the size of a child,” he replies casually. “You were cursed from birth, I think.” He has to step aside quickly to avoid Techno hitting him across the chest with the flat side of his sword. “Hey, careful! That thing is *sharp!*”

“You deserve it,” he says calmly. The fact that his ears are raised with annoyance and his tail is flicking back and forth betrays that tone.

Dream reaches over to dramatically drape his arm over his shoulders. “I can’t believe you would be so mean to me. In my hour of need...”

Techno snorts a laugh and smacks his hand lightly. “I’d swim away if you were drownin’, you know.”

He groans and leans further on him, making him stumble under his weight. “Is there no love or trust in this world anymore? No friendship or compassion for your fellow man?”

His laughter gets louder and he pushes back against him. “You’re such a *mess!*”

He laughs as well and lets him go, taking his hand instead. “You’re the one who decided to be my friend.”

“I had no choice in the matter,” Techno argues. “Where are we goin’, anyway?”

Dream reaches into his pocket to grab his folded map. “Right. I was exploring that L-shaped cave we found a couple weeks ago--” he huffs in annoyance and he elbows him. “Stop that, you weren’t even *here* . Anyway, in one of the little off-shoots, I found this... *temple* ? It’s really... really weird. There’s obsidian everywhere, and torches and stuff. It’s all overgrown, there are vines and everything’s mossy.”

He scrunches up his nose. “Are you *sure* it’s not a stronghold or somethin’?”

“ *Obsidian* , Techno,” he stresses. “No stone brick in sight.”

“I don’t know what whoever built the strongholds was thinkin’. Maybe some of them have obsidian. It’s cooler, anyway.”

“You haven’t even *seen* a stronghold!”

“I’ve seen pictures!” He waves his free hand for emphasis. “And they’re very, very lame. Maybe because *humans* built them.”

“ *Ow* .”

Techno grins crookedly and swings their hands eagerly. “So, if it’s not a stronghold, what do you think it is?”

"I don't know," Dream says honestly. "I checked in that book I have, of some ancient ruins-type stuff... and nothing in there is really like that."

"Mystery ruins," he says with grave certainty. "We're goin' to die in them."

"That would be cool. I'd like to be a mystery skeleton in some ruins."

-

Dream isn't sure when he blacked out. When his awareness flickered and died like a bad radio connection. When he lost all control and was arrested in darkness.

But he's well aware of when he comes back.

It's about one second before Techno slices his sword across his chest.

Fear fills his stomach like icy water as he feels the keen edge of the diamond blade slice through his hoodie, his shirt, and then his flesh, drawing hot blood and sending flashes of pain throughout his entire body.

"Techno, what--" he chokes, not on blood but on his own *heavy* breathing, "-- *what's going on?* "

Techno is staring down at him, his gold eyes blank of any expression, his mouth parted with heavy breathing. There's blood dripping down from his left temple and his left hand, making soft sounds when it hits the stone floor. Red soaks his soft pink hair and the fabric of his white shirt. His glasses are gone, as is his crown.

The sword in his hand is dripping blood, as well. *His* blood.

Dream tries to shuffle back on the floor, shaking all over. Heavy terror sinks into his veins as he tries to take in the situation.

The last thing he remembers is... walking through the cave leading to the ruins he found. That has to be where he was, right? How did he end up here, laying on his back on the damp, mossy floor of this room?

"Techno," he repeats, voice trembling. "What *happened?* "

Techno's mouth twitches, some vague attempt at emotion, but he just keeps stepping forward, following his movements.

He doesn't look... like he's alive, anymore. There's no light in his eyes, and the little of his skin he can see through the blood is startlingly pale. The only way he can tell he's alive is the heaving movements of his chest, the jerky way he moves.

(Once, a long time ago, he watched from atop a building as zombies invaded the village he had been living near.

There had been a morbid fascination, deep in his mind, about the black-eyed zombies, their shambling movements, the vague groans and gurgles they let out as they pursued the living.)

“How did you get hurt?” Dream asks, trying to draw *some* kind of reaction from Techno. He needs to snap *whatever* trance he’s in.

Techno makes a sound-- a quiet growl, low and dangerous-- and he feels his face go cold in fear. No, no, no-

He doesn’t manage to scramble back quickly enough.

The sword slices across the middle of his face. From one cheekbone, over the bridge of his nose, and then to the other. It’s a second or two of contact.

The pain is almost more blinding than the blood that floods over his eyes. He chokes on a hoarse scream and tries to keep moving away. His fingers slip on the slick, mossy stone and he loses his balance.

His left elbow hits the stone with a jarring crack that he feels all the way up to his shoulder. His fingers go numb.

He manages to scramble to his feet, though. He cradles his arm-- *broken? fractured?* -- against his body, his eyes wildly darting around the small room in an attempt to find the exit.

But it’s so dark. The torches that he had re-lit when they got down there are either out completely or burning only dimly, and there’s a disturbing, red glow coming from some of the pillars and structures around the room, including the altar. Everything looks vague and ominous in the low lighting.

He swipes his hand over his eyes, trying to clear the blood away, but he just ends up dragging the sleeve of his hoodie on the cut and making himself cry out again.

Techno is still chasing him with slow movements. He’s starting to move more-- his tail flicks back and forth behind him, his ears are raised with interest, and his hands and wrists are jerking every few seconds, sporadic little twitches.

(“Are you okay?”

“Huh?”

“Your hands are just... shaking really bad.”

“Oh, yeah, I’m fine. They do that sometimes.”

“Do they... hurt?”

“...a bit? I probably need to stop writin’ for now or it’s gonna be really bad later...”)

“Techno, please,” Dream says, voice choked. “*Please* don’t hurt me. I don’t-- I don’t know what happened. Please--”

Techno snarls. His left arm jerks violently and he loses his grasp on his sword. The polished diamond clatters on the stones, blood splattering off the blade.

His back hits the wall of the cave. His heels are pressed to the edge of the obsidian laid around the room.

He doesn't know where his axe went. Or the knife he had in his pocket. Or the ones he keeps underneath his shirt. He's unarmed...

...but so is Techno.

"Please," he repeats, cradling his hurt arm. He's crying and it stings the wound on his cheeks.

Techno blinks unevenly. His hands are actively twitching, now, even as he raises his left hand to touch his temple. His expression finally changes, creasing with confusion as his fingers meet the bloodied strands of his hair.

Dream steadies himself against the wall and swallows thickly. He's so hurt that it's hard to see, his vision blurring and blackening on the edges. "What happened?" He asks in a careful voice. He's good at dealing with scared people, children, animals... and *all* of that applies to Techno right now.

He opens his mouth, as if about to speak, but before any words can be formed, Dream suddenly feels disturbingly faint.

He stumbles forward, almost losing his balance. He throws his arms out to try and steady himself.

His vision goes entirely black, not even the dim light of the torches or the odd red glow making it to him.

Dream falls on the ground. The stone is slightly damp and just gritty enough that it hurts the wound on his chest. He thinks he might cry out, but he isn't sure.

...he moves to get up.

But he's not... in control of his body. He's slowly pushing himself up to his feet again, not shaky at all now.

But it's not... he's not deciding to do that. He's just... doing it?

He's walking. Moving forward.

His hands meet Techno's shoulders. He can tell, not only because Techno makes a noise that might be an aborted scream, but because he can feel the thin bones of his shoulders and collarbones.

(Techno has always seemed so much more... *delicate*... than him. Dream has never *once* doubted that he's strong and capable, but-- but he seems so *small* , sometimes.

Sometimes he looks at him and wonders how he can fight so recklessly.)

His vision flashes back into working order.

He's pushing Techno back, back, back, towards the obsidian altar in the middle of the cavern.

His friend is stumbling a little, staring up at him with glassy horror in his golden eyes, his pupils large. There's a wound on his temple, he can see it now. A gash, like he hit it on something. It's sluggishly bleeding, dripping down his cheek and chin.

Dream wants to say something, or stop pushing him around. Or-- or do something good to *help him*, because he's obviously hurt and confused and *scared*.

But he can't. His body isn't under his control, no matter how hard he tries to take it back.

What's happening? Why can't I stop myself? I don't want to hurt him. Let go of him. Why can't I let go of him?

SHUT UP.

The voice isn't his, nor does it sound like anyone he knows. It hurts his mind to hear it.

Who are you? He thinks desperately, watching his body move forward and finally shove Techno towards the altar.

Don't worry about me, baby boy. I'll take care of your friend.

Don't hurt him, his internal voice is strained with panic. *Did you already hurt him?*

His vision blurs again. If he could, he would scream.

I told you, I'll take care of it.

Before his vision goes black, he can see his hands grab Techno by the waist and forcefully turn him.

He pushes him forward and he falls on the altar, laying on his stomach. His head makes painful contact with the stone and he can see him try to sit up.

He lunges forward and forces him back down on the obsidian, his hand wrapped around the back of his neck, tangled in his loose hair. He lets out a terrible whimpery sound and he gets uncomfortably close to him, kicking his legs apart.

And then he can't see anything.

Fear closes off Dream's emotions into only a panicked, internal howl.

-

Dream sits on the roof of his house, staring up at the afternoon sky.

He doesn't know what's happening to him. What's *been* happening to him.

The missing time. The damaged weapons. The unexplainable injuries.

He tried to talk to Techno, earlier today.

He hadn't made it past the porch.

"Get out," Wilbur had spit, pushing him back down the stairs. Dream had gone mostly willingly, though he was feeling the same helpless confusion as he did during whatever happened in the ruined temple. "You have a lot of nerve, coming over here after hurting him like that. What the *hell* is wrong with you?"

(For a moment, he could see Techno, behind him in the doorway, looking at them with empty, doll-like eyes.)

He didn't have an answer. He'd *love* an answer, personally. But none have been forthcoming.

"Who are you?" He asks himself, asks the Other Thing in his mind, fruitlessly--

You know me, boy.

He jolts with surprise. He's asked it questions before, but it *never* answered. "No, I don't. How are you in my head?"

I thought you were smarter than this. A pity. It stops speaking for a moment, and he hears a disturbingly low laugh, one that seems to echo inside of his head. **How is your *arm* healing, Dream?**

His arm?

Dream blinks up at the sky, rubbing his arm absently. He's wearing short sleeves, because it's summer and entirely too hot outside.

His fingers brush over the scars from... that night with the creature.

He feels cold, now.

"You... you're that *thing* I killed. Earlier this year..."

Yes, good job.

"What are you?"

A demon.

He swallows thickly. "Why are you in my head?"

I possessed you.

"Why?"

A curious one, aren't you? It laughs again. **I possessed you because I need to *feed*, and you seemed like a perfect host.**

He shudders at the implication. "What... what do you feed on?"

I'll let you think about that one.

He sits up and wraps his arms around himself. He feels cold and scared and a little bit frantic. "I'm losing my mind," he mutters. "I'm talking to myself. This isn't real..."

Oh, it would be much better if you suffered from some weakness or affliction of the mind, I promise you. Unfortunately for you, I assure you that *I am very real* .

He runs a hand through his hair and bites at the inside of his cheek. "I don't believe you."

Hm.

His hand, the right one, the one that was running through his hair, suddenly jerks away from him without his permission, and lands on his knee. He blinks down at it, confused, and watches as it curls into a fist, all without his control.

The demon lets out a laugh, and Dream shouts in alarm as his fist slams into the wood of the roof. Pain shocks through his knuckles and he curses, drawing the limb close to his chest.

"You've made your point," he mutters.

Are you sure? I could do it again.

He shakes his head. "Do you eat *pain* ?" He guesses.

I *can* eat pain, yes.

He rubs his knuckles, exhaling shakily. "Is *that* why you hurt Techno?"

Ah, your pretty friend. Yes, that's why I hurt her.

"*Him* ," Dream corrects irritably. "Techno is a boy."

Could have fooled me, it says in a somewhat airy tone. For some reason, his stomach hurts at the odd implication in its voice. **Fine, then. That's why I hurt *him* . I was hungry, and his fear was delicious.**

He shivers again. "You eat fear?"

Fear, pain, distress, grief... anything of that nature.

He swallows thickly and draws his legs up to his chest. "And... you need to possess me to do that?"

Yes. Unfortunately, I cannot harvest misery to devour on my own. A mortal host is needed.

“I don’t want you to hurt anyone I care about.”

That ship has already sailed, baby boy. How is Technoblade doing?

He feels his face go hot, and he hides it in his knees.

I could make you someone people fear, Dream. Doesn’t that sound tempting? People *fearing you* instead of looking down on you?

“People don’t look down on me anymore. I’m... I’m *happy* .”

Are you? It’s voice is sincere. Your best friend has all but cut you off. Your brothers are worried about you. And that boy you like... he isn’t in your grasp yet, not entirely. I could help you with all of that.

He blinks, and tears roll down his cheeks. “Don’t do anything to George, *please* .”

If I want to, I will. You can’t exactly stop me.

Dream grits his teeth. “I’ll... I’ll exorcise you. That’s what you do with demons, right?”

Good luck finding someone who both knows what I am and knows the rituals needed to purge me from your mind.

“I’ll ask...” he trails off. Would anyone he know have that kind of knowledge?

Bad is half-demon, but that doesn’t exactly mean he’ll know how to exorcise a demon from a human host. Philza might know, he seems to have a lot of obscure knowledge. Maybe Puffy...?

And... no, no one else would know...

I’ll save you the trouble, boy. Neither of them know, nor does anyone in this area. Nor does anyone within miles of this place. I am something rarely seen, something ancient. If any information about my kind exists in books, it’s only as a footnote, a theory. I am something *forgotten* .

He swallows. “What *are* you?”

It *says something* , but his brain doesn’t-- doesn’t let him *process* it. He just hears shrieking and low growling and a buzzing sound like radio static. He puts his hands over his ears to block it out, despite the sound coming from inside his head. He feels dizzy.

“What was *that* ?”

The name of my kind.

“That sounded like nonsense.”

Ah, that's right. Humans can't understand our tongue... It sounds almost *annoyed* with itself. **There's no direct translation. Simply put, I am a possession demon. We anchor ourselves to a mortal host, and feed off of their emotions, along with the emotions of other mortals.**

He leans back on the roof again. "Do all of... your kind... eat *misery*?"

No, they don't. Only the most powerful.

He lets out a sad laugh that's more of a sob. "Lucky me."

You should be honored. I was the lucky one here, really, stumbling upon a strong, young host. You're sixteen, aren't you? A *perfect* age to become my new body.

He shudders. "I don't want to be your... *body* ." There's a low resentment and anger building in his chest. "I want you to *leave me alone* ."

Unfortunately for you, we're tied for the rest of your life.

"This isn't *fair* ."

Demons aren't exactly known for their fair and ethical nature, baby boy.

He gets up from his slumped position and walks over to the edge of the roof, sitting down and searching blindly with his foot to get down to his window.

He manages it, sliding through the open pane. The house is quiet-- Sapnap isn't home right now, and Purpled is quietly reading in his room.

Like usual, really.

His world is the only one shattered, in this household.

Dream falls back on his bed, the unmade blankets cushioning his fall. "Are you going to hurt my brothers?" He asks weakly.

I don't know. I don't have plans, but who knows what the future will bring?

He turns on his side and hugs himself. "I... I, uh... what would I have to do for you to leave the people I care about alone?"

It goes quiet for a long moment. Dream can hear the clock in the living room ticking on and on, the little murmurs that leave Purpled as he gets very into his reading, the creak of the trees around the house.

Mm... that's an interesting question, baby boy. What would you have to do...?

He stares up at the ceiling.

Kill someone.

He blinks hard. His eyes are hot with tears and he doesn't really know when they became that way. "Who?"

Anyone, Dream. Anyone at all.

He licks his lips and pushes himself into a sitting position. "I don't... I'm not a killer. I'm *sixteen...* "

I can see in your memories that you're skilled in combat, though. Those skills can *easily* translate to a murder.

He crosses his legs on the blankets and hugs himself. "If I... kill someone, you'll leave my brothers and everyone alone?"

For a time, yes.

He swallows thickly. "I'll have to go away from here to do it. I don't... want to get caught."

I'll handle that part, if you like. I'll take your body somewhere where you won't be caught in the act.

He hugs himself tighter. "I... I can't leave my brothers here alone..."

It'll only be for a few days. It has a bizarre, almost *comforting* tone. **Ask one of your friends to watch over them, if you're that worried.**

He lays down again. "That... that could work." He closes his eyes.

-

Dream tugs his hood up as he steps onto the swept cobblestone pathway, adjusting his mask as well. Disguising his features is more natural than exposing them, at this point.

He walks with his head down, his hand resting on the strap of his bag. The broad leaves above him in the tree canopy only let scattered sunlight down to him.

No one speaks to him, though people are walking on the path with him. The people in this town keep to themselves.

He counts the houses he passes.

One, two, three, four, five, six.

Seven, eight, nine...

Ten, eleven.

He stops in front of the modest building and walks up the cobblestone stairs, his fingers brushing along the railing absentmindedly.

He hopes she's home. She's usually home at this time of day, but he doesn't know if she's even in town.

He twists the string on his hoodie absentmindedly, before knocking briskly on the front door.

She has to be home. She *has* to be home, so he can talk to her about *this*. Not... the specifics, of course. But at least... the fact that *someone* needs to watch his brothers.

He can hear footsteps on the wooden floor, and then Puffy opens the door, looking tired but happy.

Her smile widens at the sight of him. "Hi, Dream. Come inside, I haven't seen you in so long!"

Dream allows himself to be led into the house, shrugging off his hoodie and removing his mask when she prompts him to.

He shakes his hair out and smiles instinctively when she pulls him into a hug. She's the only adult he's let hug him since his own parents died.

"You've gotten taller," Puffy says praisingly, pulling back and looking him over. "Look at you. I can't believe you used to be one of the skinniest kids I'd ever seen." She grins.

"I have steady food now, that probably explains it," he says, unable to prevent his own grin. Being with Puffy makes him feel better about everything. "Where have you been?"

She pulls him to the table and they sit side by side. "Here and there," she says vaguely, her smile going mysterious. "Don't you worry about it. How are your brothers?"

Dream exhales shakily. "Right, uh. That's why I'm here, actually." His legs start bouncing under the table, and he's suddenly trembling.

"I have to- to be out of town for a bit. Like, a week or two. And I don't really feel c-comfortable just leaving them alone for that long. Sure, they-- they can handle themselves, but... I wanted to ask if you could check on them every once in a while, while I'm gone?"

Puffy looks at him for a long moment, her brows furrowed, her hands clasped on the table. Confusion flickers in her blue eyes.

He understands; he had been adamant about not needing her help with his brothers, from the first time he mentioned them to her.

He remembers that day well. He was thirteen, and had met Puffy a few years earlier, at nine, when she rescued him from an angry crowd of shop owners who had found the thief that was stealing from all of them. From then on, he trusted her more than he trusted any adult since his parents both died.

He had just found Purpled in the Nether two weeks before. Despite the kid *choosing* to follow them out, he had apparently been very overwhelmed by a new dimension, and had spent much of his time curled up atop the cabinets or underneath his bed. He was very quiet

and really only emerged to eat, and usually at very odd hours-- more odd than his own, somehow.

And it didn't help that Sapnap seemed *predisposed* to dislike him, and kept getting annoyed with him for small things, to the point of making angry, blazelike noises and getting *literally* fired up whenever he lingered in the same room as him for too long.

Which is why Purpled spent the first year of their time together sleeping in Dream's room, because Sapnap would just get mad at him if they shared.

Dream had visited Puffy that day, primarily because he needed a break. Purpled was asleep at home, and he had warned him he'd be out. Sapnap was out with friends for the day, and wouldn't be back until well after nightfall.

So he stole away from home and visited her, craving the comfort of her presence. She had noticed he seemed stressed, and filled his head with tales of her adventures to distract him.

They spent a good few hours like that; Puffy telling her stories while Dream sat with his head on her lap, allowing her to brush his hair back from his face.

She stopped talking after a while, petting his hair with one hand. "So, why are you so upset, duckling?" She asked. His hair was completely untangled by then, but she still stroked it.

He sighed and sank against her lap.

And he told her everything; finding Sapnap in a burnt-out patch of grass and flowers when he was little, trying his best to care for him when he was young as well, finding Purpled in the Nether, the tensions between the two hybrids-- he rambled about it for at least fifteen minutes, unable to stop once he started.

He ended up sitting up and began fidgeting with his hoodie and his mask, turning the porcelain over in his hands, playing with the stitching along the pocket and the sleeves. At the end of his rant, he went completely quiet and stared down at his lap.

"Poor thing," Puffy murmured, raising her hand to push his hair back from his face. "I can't imagine how stressful that is for you. Taking on so much responsibility when you're so young..."

Dream sighed and leaned his head against her hand. "I couldn't just *leave* them," he murmured. "Sapnap was all alone, and so was Purpled. I couldn't-- it would have weighed on me *forever*, Puffy."

"I don't blame you," she said, petting his cheek with her knuckles. "You're a very loving kid, and you want to take care of people. So of course you took them in; your heart wouldn't let you do otherwise."

She paused for a moment. "I've been meaning to ask you anyway, but... would you like to bring your brothers and come live with me?"

He froze at the offer, handed to him so casually. She was still petting his cheek, brushing her knuckles against the bandage across his nose, and her eyes, so clear and bright, glittered with sincerity.

“I...” Dream hesitated. “I think it’d be better if we didn’t,” he said carefully. “We’d be a handful. And Sapnap would probably burn the place down...”

Puffy smiled, shaking her head lightly. “I’m ready to take that responsibility, you know.”

He had further refused the offer. The idea of putting *his* responsibilities on another person was oddly scary. And what would he do, with the pressure of caring for his brothers off his shoulders? He just couldn’t accept it.

In the present, Puffy’s brows furrow deeper and she nods. “Of course, I’ll make sure they’re okay. Where are you going?” She takes his hand and holds it gently between her own.

Dream swallows hard. His eyes sting with tears he *can’t* let fall. “I... I’m going to go see an old friend,” he says carefully. “She, uh- she sent me a letter. Figured out where I was, somehow. And she sent me a map, so I... I mean, she knew my parents and stuff, so...”

He’s lying. His parents were habitual loners and considered “too weird” by literally *everyone*. He didn’t have *any* friends until he was eight, because his parents drove other kids away.

She squeezes his hand, and then brings it up and kisses the back of his palm. His eyes twitch as he closes them and wills his tears away.

“I’ll make sure your brothers are perfectly safe,” she promises.

-

Dream stands silently behind a thick tree, staring around the branches.

There’s a person. A man, not all too much older than him. Maybe twenty or twenty-one. He’s tall, but not too muscular, dressed in brown and green.

He’s out hunting.

Technically, Dream is too.

Get to it, the demon hisses in his head. Kill him, Dream.

He swallows thickly and turns his sword in his hand. *I don't want to*, he thinks back to it.

You’re already here. Kill him, or I’ll go after those precious little brothers of yours.

He shudders. *Okay, I get it.*

The man has a bow in hand, and is aiming off into the opposite trees.

He doesn't want to kill this man, but he does want to keep his little brothers safe. The rest of his friends, too, especially Techno. (Especially after... whatever it did to him in the ruins.)

He just has to... *do it* , even though he doesn't *want* to hurt him.

Dream steps, quietly, around the tree. He holds his sword carefully, skillfully, as he always has.

His victim (he winces) lowers his bow and huffs in annoyance. He turns towards the trail, leading back into the nearby town.

Dream attacks, refusing to think about it.

The man goes down with a shout, slamming chest-first into the dirt. A deer hops off into the trees and brush at the sound.

He kneels over the man's back, and drives his sword into his torso, entering his body just between his shoulderblades. He can hear bones cracking, flesh and fabric tearing, blood spilling.

He dies quickly. Dream attacked him in a way that would assure that. He doesn't want to make someone suffer for no reason.

He gets up from the corpse.

There's blood splattered on his clothes. None of it is anything he owned before this, on purpose.

The man's body is already drawing in bugs.

Dream pulls off his bloodied clothing and changes into a new outfit. He cleans his mask, before moving to put it back on.

He killed someone. With his own hands, he ended another person's life.

That man could've had family waiting for him. A partner, maybe a kid or two. A sickly parent that needs his attention and care. A dog that's going to be wondering where its owner is.

His eyes well with tears and they roll down his cheeks. He drops his mask and it clatters on the damp ground.

He buries his face in his hands and smothers his sobs. It's not fair of him to be upset. He chose to do *this* , to protect his loved ones.

He knows it was selfish. It *is* selfish for him to put the people he cares about above a stranger's life.

He hiccups and his tears sink into his jacket sleeves.

I hate how emotional mortals are, it comments, tone mocking. **Why are you crying? You didn't care about him.**

He wipes his eyes and nose. "I... I've never *killed* someone. It feels *horrible* ." His voice comes out hollow.

It mutters, annoyed, but none of it is coherent.

He wraps his arms around himself after sliding his sword back into his belt.

He doesn't stop crying for a while.

-

Dream manages to wander his way home, after several days of travel. He returns the horse he rode to the stables in town, and walks home.

Or, he's well on his way, until someone calls his name from behind.

When he turns around, he finds George walking down the path towards him, obviously angry, ears perked and tail whipping from side to side.

Dream manages a smile. He cried for most of his trip home, and he's glad he was alone. "Hey," he waves a hand hesitantly.

George stops at his side and crosses his arms. He raises a brow. "Where have you been?" He asks, with a clear tone of outrage and a softer one of genuine hurt. "I have to leave again tomorrow, and you've been gone the entire time I've been here. So, *where were you?* "

His face goes cold, and he tucks his hands into his pockets, avoiding his gaze.

Between what happened in the ruins (*less than a month ago*, he thinks with despair) and the demon screwing with his already-odd perception of time, he entirely forgot that George would be there for this month, visiting whatever family it is he has in town.

So he didn't think about him being around when he ran off to-

When he ran off to-

When he-

Dream shakes his head hard and gives George a hesitant glance, not smiling. "I'm really sorry," he says softly. "I, uh... I went out to v-visit this old friend of mine, f-from when I was younger..." He brushes his palms on his pants to rid them of a guilty sweat. If George presses on the truth, he might just *tell* him, as ugly and disgusting as it is. "I didn't remember that you were visiting." He finishes, looking down at the ground again.

George huffs, and his left shoe scuffs on the dirt. "You were just... visiting someone else, this whole time?" he asks, voice softer now. "You *forgot* our plans?"

He scrambles to remember what plans they actually had. A picnic, a trip to the lake... lots of time exploring the forest together... sword-fighting lessons, since his family doesn't like him learning that...

"I'm sorry," he says a little too thickly, throat getting tight. "I didn't really forget, I just-- I didn't realize you were visiting *now*."

George sighs quietly, and then lets out a small hiss. "I won't be able to come back until autumn," he says irritably. "I won't be able to *see you* until then."

Dream fidgets with his sleeve, staring down at the dirt. It's full of small pebbles and blackish pine needles.

Between the heavy, awful grief of killing another person, and the painful, low ache in his chest when he thinks about how he threw away his only chance to see George after months apart, his eyes are hot with tears and he wants to just climb under his blankets to sob.

"Did you avoid me on purpose?" George asks, voice almost fragile.

Dream hiccups and tears run down his cheeks. He covers his mouth with his hand and aggressively shakes his head, not wanting to cry, not wanting his boyfriend to think he didn't *want* to see him.

"No, I didn't-- I *promise* I didn't." He's speaking through the cage of his fingers, and he reaches out his other hand to grip George's wrist. "I swear, I just-- I don't know. But I *swear*, I wasn't avoiding you. I--" *I love you* is on the tip of his tongue, but it doesn't quite come out yet.

George's face softens all around, and he shifts his hand just enough to take hold of Dream's own, intertwining their fingers. He raises the other to rest on his cheek, cupping it gently.

The gentle touch feels undeserved. He killed a man for-- for selfish reasons, for the demon in his head, for what might just be *madness*. He hurt his best friend in a way he doesn't want to think about-- that he *can't* think about it. His brothers have started to look at him oddly, with worry, with apprehension.

And his boyfriend thinks he's *avoiding* him.

"Dream, hey-- no, it's okay," Gentle fingers pry his hand from his mouth and face, and then wipe away his tears. "Don't cry. I'm not angry, okay? I was just- a little upset, but you don't need to cry. I know you weren't avoiding me."

Dream doesn't deserve the kindness, the soft voice, the tender hand holding his face and stroking away his tears.

I killed someone is on the tip of his tongue now, the confession sharper than his desire to tell George he loves him. He doesn't deserve the love or the kindness or the gentleness, he killed a man to protect his loved ones.

George cups his cheek and leans up to tenderly kiss him, just once. “It’s okay,” he murmurs. “Don’t be upset, please. I’m sorry I seemed angry.”

He can’t keep himself from crying, but he’s able to unfreeze enough to wrap his arms around him and hug him close. He doesn’t deserve it, but he wants the comfort regardless.

-

Dream grabs tightly onto the doorframe. His vision is blurry with the pain from the burn on his chest and he’s shaking so hard he can barely stay on his feet.

He doesn’t know what the demon did, in detail. He only heard muddled snippets of the argument it sparked with Sapnap.

None of it was pretty.

He’s *not* going to forgive it for calling his little brother a whore.

He limps to the bathroom. There’s a burn on his leg, too. The right one, around his knee. It’s painful, but not nearly as bad as the one on his chest.

He pulls medical supplies from the cabinet next to the mirror and spreads them out on the counter. He pulls off the ragged remains of his hoodie and undershirt, throwing them into the garbage. They’re unsalvageable, burnt nearly beyond recognition.

He grabs a towel and runs it under the cool water of the sink. The burn on his chest is... more intense, so he props his leg up on the closed toilet lid and pulls away the burnt fabric of his pants. Laying the cool towel on his burnt knee makes him flinch, but the relief is pleasant as well.

This is a burn he knows how to treat. He got a lot of these, when he was younger. Taking care of Sapnap early on involved lots of burns, most of them small and subtle like this one.

He didn’t have very good control over his fire abilities, to put it lightly.

“I’m sorry! I didn’t mean to, you just- just *scared* me-- Dream, I’m so sorry--” Sapnap’s glowing eyes were wide and his hot hands fluttered around Dream’s burnt arm. “Does it hurt? Oh, o-of course it does, I’m sorry!”

Dream shook his head and gently ruffled up his hair. “Nah, kiddo, it’s okay. I know you didn’t mean to.”)

He’s able to soothe the burn enough for him to wrap it loosely but securely, after removing his pants and applying medicine.

Now, his chest.

He blinks hard and observes the burn in the mirror.

It’s... not good.

It's lightest at the edges, his skin wet and deeply pink. It gets darker and more dry-looking towards the middle. The deepest redness is just over the left side of his chest, and that's where it's driest.

It's an ugly burn. But it still hurts, so it's not as horrible as it could be.

He wets a thin cloth with cool water once more, and lays it over his chest. He hisses through his teeth-- any pressure on the burn feels like the fire all over again.

But the water slowly offers relief, after a few moments of agony. He's able to keep the cloth to his chest as he digs out more burn medicine and tries to find enough bandages. He hasn't had to treat a burn in ages.

"I don't know why you did that," he mutters. "There was *no* reason to start a fight with him."

He was getting too curious.

"He's my *brother*. It makes sense that he'd want to know what the *hell* is wrong with me."

I tried my best to drive him off nonviolently. Contrary to your belief, Dream, I *don't* harm needlessly.

He remembers it snapping one of George's fingers for replying to an innocuous question wrong.

"Of course you don't," he says, a little breathless. It's not the wound that's causing him distress. "Could you have picked a fight with him without getting him to set me on fire? Burns like this can take ages to heal, and I know you won't stay down long enough for that..."

He's a blaze, the fire was inevitable. I managed to avoid getting your pretty face burnt, so you should be thankful. He can imagine it's grin.

He huffs and takes the cloth from his chest. The exceptional heat from the burn has warmed it too much. He wrings it out and lays it on the counter to dry, and manages to dig out another cloth in a short enough time that the pain doesn't rebound too much before he can cool it again.

It still hurts. He's crying.

He spends most of his moments of consciousness crying.

It'll heal fine, Dream, it says, oddly gentle. You can handle the early stages, and my influence over your body will take over. It'll be nothing but a scar in a few months.

He wipes his eyes and opens the container of burn medicine. The scent is morbidly nostalgic. (He still makes burn medicine according to the recipe his mom wrote out. It's been in his potion book for years, and the demon uses it whenever it bothers to make medicines.)

He lets the second cool cloth lay on his chest, and closes his eyes for a moment. The burn isn't too bad. He'll heal. He- he'll be fine. He'll be fine... the demon's influence will take over and he'll heal just fine--

He jolts and grips onto the counter with one hand, holding the cloth with the other. He locks his eyes on the mirror.

"What the fuck do you mean by *your influence over my body*, " he says, and it's not a question. It's more like a death rattle.

It coos at him, clearly amused. **Oh, don't tell me you don't realize, baby boy. You're not quite *human* anymore. It's one of the side effects of long-term possession.**

Dream exhales shakily and stares at the space above his left shoulder. A black form flickers behind him. "I know I'm not... not human, not anymore. But that doesn't mean you can... heal things on my body better when you're in control, right? That doesn't make sense, I should be able to heal quickly on my own if that's the case. We share a body."

But we don't share states of mortality, it says, still half-laughing. I can heal any wound inflicted to my own physical body in mere minutes, and some of that applies to when I'm in yours. It's how I've been able to survive some of the scrapes I've gotten us into.

He pulls the cloth from his chest and wrings it out in the sink. He tosses both of the damp cloths into the laundry. "So, when you're in control... my body goes by demon rules," he guesses. "At least in terms of healing wounds."

Somewhat, yes. It's not nearly as quick, but it's a fraction of the time it takes for a normal human. As the years go on...

He shudders at the idea of more years of *this* . Things are already horrible after-- six or seven years, however long it's been. He lost track a long time ago. Under a decade, at least.

He's... twenty? Nineteen, maybe.

"How *old* am I?" he asks, and he's mortified to find his voice cracking.

You turn twenty this year. In a few months.

His breath leaves him in a shivering movement. "Oh."

It's been... so long.

As he applies the medicine to the burn, his eyes are on his own reflection.

The scar across his face is... more faded than he last remembers. He can still trace the path Techno's sword took across his cheeks, even where the blade slipped slightly, splitting the left side into two wounds, forked like a snake's tongue.

There's a fresh split in his lower lip. On the parts of his cheeks that aren't marred by scars, he has untidy facial hair that he should probably shave. The circles under his eyes are deep and

dark, and there's just a hint of them being swollen from his tears. He still has acne along his right temple.

He touches his hairline. His hair has gotten... *so much* longer. It's still halfway in a ponytail, but even like that, his fringe comes down to his jawline.

He always kept his hair short when he was younger. It was easier to hide, and it gave people less to grab.

Now, he supposes no one is going to try and grab him by the hair for stealing. But it still feels wrong.

(He's always been fairly unattached to the length of his hair, and he was always unaffected by having to get haircuts. He always cut his own hair, save for a few times Puffy offered to do it for him.

Sapnap hated haircuts, and he still might, seeing how long his hair is now. Purpled got too nervous about scissors near his neck that he insisted on either cutting his own hair or making Dream specifically do it.

In the entire time he's known him, including now, he's only aware of Techno getting a haircut three times, and two of those times it was merely a trim.

The other time...

The other time wasn't really a trim.)

He wraps the burn on his chest, after carefully applying the strongest burn medicine he has.

There are scars and marks on his body he doesn't recognize, just like his face. A set of vertical scars near his navel, like clawmarks. A clear bitemark on his shoulder. What looks like cigarette burns on one of his arms, just above his elbow.

The burn now covers the scar from the ruined temple, but that one is such an ugly memory that he's going to like the burn scar a lot more, he's sure.

He runs his fingers over the horizontal self-harm scars on his wrist.

He suddenly feels faint, and he sinks against the counter. He avoids looking in the mirror as he stares down at the faded scars.

("Will-- will hurting myself be enough?" he had asked aloud to his empty room. A map and a few scattered pencils were spread out on his desk; he was planning where he could go to kill someone. "You eat pain. I can... I can give you pain.")

The demon was silent for a few long moments, before saying **I suppose that would feed me for a while.**

He hadn't hesitated to open his desk drawer and grab a knife.)

(It lied. Of course it fucking lied.)

He wraps his arms around himself and looks at the mirror again.

The demon is standing behind him, black hands resting on his shoulders. It's leaning over him, head above his, unsmiling.

Poor baby boy, it says softly. **You should head to bed. Aren't you tired? I'll let you sleep for a while.**

Dream exhales shakily. "Will you?" His voice is weak. "I really want to sleep."

He never gets to sleep, not really. In their head, he sleeps, but it's not really *sleeping*. It's just... blackness. Silence. *Nothingness*, most of the time, unless he gets the odd moment of murky awareness, occasional words and sensations, sounds and flashes of lights.

Of course I'll let you, the demon murmurs. **You've been a good host, you know. You've given me so many good opportunities to feed. I've never been so *fed*, Dream.**

He hates hearing that. He doesn't want to be a *good host*.

He wanders to his sparse bedroom. The demon doesn't care too much for comfort. But the bed isn't too bad-- the blankets are thin but soft, and the pillows are oddly plush.

He pulls on a shirt and soft pants.

And then he crawls into bed.

Go to sleep, Dream. I'll let you sleep for as long as you need.

He doesn't argue.

-

The house is drowning in an ethereal dawn blueness.

Dream lays on his side, aware but trapped, and watches George sleep.

It's probably creepy. He knows why the demon does it-- god, does he know-- but his motives are purer.

He just likes seeing him relaxed. Calm. Not wound up with fear and anxiety and pain. His face is restful and calm, the furrow between his brows absent, his mouth a soft line. He breathes gently, slowly.

The demon raises their hand and pets George's bare arm. He shivers in his sleep and turns towards them. Bruises and scabbed bitemarks ruin the content appearance of his rest.

You're a horrible, horrible person.

I'm not a person, so that doesn't particularly bother me.

Dream watches as George blindly tugs at the blankets, trying to pull them up over his naked shoulders. *He loves you, you know. Or-- you pretending to be me, I guess.*

I'm rather fond of him as well. It's voice is calm, low. Almost drowsy. He doesn't want to think about why. **Perhaps because he's such an easy victim. And because he's so pretty.**

It runs their fingers over a bite on his collarbone. It's deeply scarred; that's where it likes to bite most.

Marriage is an absurd concept, it says, almost out of nowhere. **How do you think he'd react if I proposed the idea?**

Dream once thought it was impossible to feel angry while trapped in your own mind. It's not. *Don't you fucking dare hurt him anymore than you already have. He won't want to marry you anyway, he wants to leave.*

He wants to marry you, though. I can see it in his eyes. No matter what I do to him using your identity, he still seems to love you. The devotion is very sweet, I have to admit.

-

The awareness hits him, and he takes no time to adjust. At least he's used to how it feels to be pulled back into his own body, settling into its weight easily even when it's *unfamiliar*.

Dream is sitting next to a campfire. The flames are warm and flickering, and the air smells like burning wood and cooking meat. It's a pleasant smell; it reminds him of the stove back at home, what feels a thousand years ago...

There's something warm resting on his lap. He blinks and looks down.

Tommy has his head resting on his legs, his breathing uneven. Dream's hand rests on top of his head.

His wings are folded up against his back, but one of them looks wrong; the feathers are oddly darkened near his back and it looks crooked.

He doesn't know what happened, but he can see the glimmer of tears on his cheek. It makes his stomach twist into a sympathetic little knot. *Oh no.*

"Dream?" Tommy asks quietly. He nods and pats his head to acknowledge him. "Um... can you sing?"

Dream knows he doesn't have a lot of time. He never really does.

"Yeah," he says softly. "Is there anything you want to hear?"

"N-no, just... I want you to sing," the younger snuggles in closer, his head settled against his legs, a hand coming up to grab at the fabric of his pants. "I like singing. It- it makes me feel *better*."

He's actually fairly good at singing. On occasion, he'd sing for Sapnap and Purpled when they were sick or upset, and he tried to ask George out for the first time with a song.

It's been a while, though. So, he picks something *simple* , something soothing.

"You are my sunshine, my only sunshine... you make me happy, when skies are grey."

He runs his fingers through Tommy's tangled, somewhat greasy hair, just trying to soothe him. He's trembling a little, though he can't tell if maybe he's just cold.

"You'll never know, dear, how much I love you..."

He knows the demon has been *hurting him* . He's not around enough to stop it, nor does he think he ever could, but... he can do things like this, little things to help him cope with this awful situation.

He knows how it feels, to be trapped with that thing. Hasn't that been the case for... *so long* , for him?

How many years has it been? How old is he now? How old was he when he was taken? He can't remember all too well. Sixteen? Seventeen?

Has he even *aged* ? His body has aged, but has his mind?

He can feel himself fading out. Like a radio going out of range.

"Please don't take my sunshine away," he manages to get out, before he's gone again.

He prays to *every* god he can think of that his voice can be a comfort to Tommy.

-

Dream is trapped in his own body, watching something he doesn't want to watch.

"Dream-" George's voice is choked off by the hands around his throat.

His mismatched eyes grow wide and a few odd vessels burst in the whites of them.

He can feel his own hands move suddenly.

George lets out a terrible, broken mewl, kittenlike and terrified.

His neck *cracks* .

His own hands loosen, and his body falls to the floor of their living room.

He's **dead** .

He killed him.

The demon - killed him.

Dream *screams* within his mind.

-

Dream hears a voice he doesn't quite recognize, floating through the blackness of his mind.

He has no idea what they're talking about, but the demon is speaking, because he can hear his own voice. Or, at least, the weird older version of his voice.

"This isn't going to be easy," the unfamiliar voice says. "Are you sure this is a good idea?"

"I definitely think it will be useful," the demon says casually. "I trust that you'll be able to work this out."

Again, he has no idea what they're talking about.

But it's-

It doesn't feel *good*.

-

Dream bites into the tough bread and stares at the small window across the kitchen from him.

This is their old house. The one that he both loves and hates.

There's blood stains on all of the furniture. He burned a lot of blankets and sheets that were just-- eugh. Too gross to keep.

Not that anything about this place is worth keeping.

He spent the morning cleaning the kitchen regardless. Mostly because he needed something normal while he was in control.

Dream, the demon sing-songs. **What are you doing here again? Your poor kitten isn't trapped here anymore. I believe he's with your little brother... I wonder how *that* relationship is working out.**

He takes another bite of his bread and keeps his eyes on the blue sky outside of the window. "Nothing is happening between them," he mutters. "I know you're stupid, but you're smart enough to understand that."

You're feeling very rude today, aren't you?

He leans back on the chair. "I'm allowed to be rude to you, dickhead."

It laughs, and he can feel the shaking of it. **Oh, what have I done?**

"Do you want a list?" he deadpans. "You've ruined my life, along with the lives of my loved ones and complete strangers. I can get more detailed, too."

Feisty, it comments. **I know I've done a lot of cruel things, but I don't feel too bad. I'm a demon, Dream, it's what I'm meant to do.**

He finishes his bread and gets up to grab a towel and wipe off the table. "Not all demons are horrible," he says with a strange calmness.

It makes one of those uncomfortable demonic noises, and Dream instinctively covers his ears. **Your halfling friend is the *exception*, not the rule. He's a *pathetic* excuse for a nightmare demon, he won't even give people terrors. He just takes them from his loved ones. That's why he's so *weak*; I could kill him easily.**

He sweeps crumbs off the table, and the countertops as well. The movements are routine and he misses being able to just behave like a normal human.

"I'd rather have a 'weak' nightmare demon eating my dreams than a suffering-fueled bastard who hurts my loved ones," he replies, now walking to grab their broom.

You should be more grateful for my influence, the demon mutters. **You were a strong but *pathetic* child; I made you more interesting, more notorious, more desired. You had a perfect little pet before he ran away, people are terrified of you, you can have whatever you want. But you have to keep your annoying mortal morals and get snippy with me because I do things you find *objectionable*.**

"Shut up."

You've always wanted to be *known*, Dream.

He sweeps up dust and dirt and crumbs from the tiled floor, too distracted to care. He doesn't say anything in response.

You're not going to like my recent plans.

He freezes, the dustpan held tightly in his hand. "What?"

I'm not going to bore you with the details. But you know, I've *really* missed Technoblade.

He drops the dustpan and it clatters, dust and dirt poofing around his feet. "Do not hurt Techno," he says flatly. "You *know* I won't let you do anything to him or anyone else."

Sure you won't.

He steps back against the table, and his vision goes black.

Chapter End Notes

the next chapter is going to be a Big One with heavy themes.

just warning y'all in advance since it's entirely about sexual assault in levels of graphicness. there will be summaries and such so you don't *have* to read the heavy stuff, but it's a chapter i'm proud of, so i'll still be posting it lol.

also i edited this chapter at 1:30am with a major headache and random nausea so thats pretty sexy of me

strawberry gashes

Chapter Notes

the very intense chapter is here! fun fact, between me and my partner in brainrot abigail/deathsquiggles, this chapter is known as the Oh God chapter. which is very accurate!

a very serious warning for somewhat graphic rape/sexual assault, both to an adult in the present and to children in the past, along with threats towards both adults and children. basically the whole chapter deals with those kinds of topics in varying levels. and things related to that too, like some (comparatively mild) descriptions of genital trauma.

please listen to this warning; you've been Warned several times about this. i'm a sexual assault survivor myself and this chapter is deeply important to me, so if you have a Problem with it or want to call me names, please keep it to yourself. please be kind about it. you wouldn't think i'd have to say that, but people sometimes don't know how to behave.

other warnings include some negative discussions about possible pregnancy, descriptions of dissociation, mild transphobia, one acephobic comment, themes of abuse, and violence.

the word "cunt" is also used a few times which i know is Not Good to some people!

these are big warnings, but this is a chapter i'm really proud of, so if you're able to read it, i really want to hear what you think about it!!

though, there will be a summary at the end of this chapter of What Happens here with only the important details (though it's still a bit heavy and the warnings apply) if you don't feel like you can read this!! <3 be safe!

chapter title is the title of a jack off jill song that is an absolute banger

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Techno pours a spoon of sugar into his coffee and stirs it, the click of the metal against the sides of the cup soothing in the quiet house.

He's alone.

It's been a while since he was.

Not that he minds the company, obviously. He loves his family, how he's been able to piece them back together. It's just... nice, to be in the quiet, everything muted and muffled with a light spring snowfall.

It's pretty loud with everyone at home. Especially with how much... *shouting* there has been the last week.

He rubs the bruise on his cheek as he sips from his cup. He brewed it too strong; Phil makes it better than he does, as does Niki.

He sits at the table with a plate full of apple slices while he drinks his coffee and reads a book. He likes the silence. He can think a bit more clearly.

Things have been especially tense, ever since Wilbur started vocally airing his frustrations with the resurrection, a week ago now.

He's cited many things; the fact that he *begged* to be killed, the fact that he had genuinely lost his mind before his death (*and you haven't quite found it again*, Techno thinks privately) and didn't need to be brought back into anything, and the fact that it was irresponsible of them to let Tommy perform the ritual. Even when they explained the circumstances. Even when Tommy himself said it was his decision.

Wilbur had insisted that they somehow pushed or tricked him into it. Because of course *they* would be at fault for it.

Techno chuckles faintly at the thought, biting into an apple slice and flipping the page of his book.

That argument hadn't been fun. Ranboo had seemed to realize things were going *south* after dinner that night, and he immediately dragged Tommy off into their room.

It was for the best, probably, because the resulting conversation was laced with barely-hidden malice and hate and guilt-tripping.

His wrist still hurts from Wilbur grabbing it.

(There's still a pit in his stomach when he thinks about how genuinely his older brother wants to be dead.)

Maybe he'll write today. He hasn't in a while, he's had little inspiration and his hands seem to be getting *worse* instead of better, but he has some ideas now.

As he finishes a chapter, someone knocks on the door.

His eyebrows raise, and his hand immediately goes to the knife on his belt.

Cautious, always cautious, he marks his place to the book before he walks to the door. God, why doesn't their door have a peephole? A bad decision, on his part. Past Techno was a fool.

He opens it, trying to smooth his anxiety back into a neutral expression.

Dream's mask grins down at him.

Techno considers, briefly, just slamming the door in his face. He doesn't really want to start a fight, though.

"Dream," he greets, voice flat and portraying nothing but " *get the fuck off my property, please* " in it's undertones. "Why are you here?"

He tilts his head in an infuriatingly familiar way. "Just visiting an old friend. Or am I not allowed to do that, Technoblade?"

He bites into his tongue, pinning it flat between his molars on the left side, letting the flash of pain steel him before he responds. "Didn't take you for the type to pursue old friendships. Been, what... *eight* years, now?"

He laughs, that stupid wheezing laugh. He bites his tongue again. "I guess you're right. Can I come in?" He steps forward on the porch, closer to the doorway, *far* too close for comfort. "I'm here peacefully, I swear. We can be *civilized* , can't we?"

Techno feels his hands spasm with a desire to use his knife to crack open his ribcage, slice open his heart. If he even *has* one, that is. If he ever did.

"I suppose." He steps back. "Come inside."

They sit at the table.

Correction: Dream sits, lounging in a chair, and Techno hovers near the knife drawer, ignoring both his instincts and the voices.

Kill him kill him kill him

Bad intentions

Going to hurt you again

Hurt him before he hurts you

"So," Dream drawls. "I've noticed your family getting a bit... bigger, out here." His voice has an implacable yet *definitely* negative tone.

Techno taps his foot, his tail wrapping around his leg to keep from whipping side-to-side with his rising tension. "Maybe. What does that have to do with anything?"

He draws a knife from the holster around his thigh (for some reason Techno recalls watching him pet that knife while touching his scar from the ruins and it just makes him more *tense*) and traces a fingertip along the blade, almost lovingly. "I'm just saying. Wouldn't it be a *real* shame if *something* happened to any of them?"

He goes as cold as he would if he laid in the bed of snow outside.

Threatening your pack!

Break his neck

GOING TO HURT THEM

DO IT

YOU PROMISED YOU PROMISED YOU PROMISED

PROTECT THEM

Techno slides his hand over his own knife and breathes evenly to keep control.

Not yet.

He'll tire quickly if he fights now-- he's not as in practice as he'd like to be, on account of the dubiously still-healing state of about half of his ribcage. He hasn't had time to build up strength again, even with late-night mob slaying and the trip he took to the Nether and killing Quackity.

"Don't hurt them," he says, and his voice comes out a touch too soft.

Dream twirls his knife, the ease he does it with suggesting he does it often. He uses his other hand to remove his mask, setting the ceramic on the table. He tries not to look at the familiar parts of his face-- his nose, the freckles across his cheeks, the bright-green of his eyes.

"I know you don't want any harm to come to them," he says, sliding his knife back into the holster. He rises, brushes off his pants. "How about we make a deal?"

Before he can answer, he crosses the small space between the table and the counter, and crowds him against it. Easily, his hand grasps his wrists and tugs them up near his chest, making his hands twitch with pain, and the other rests heavily on his hip.

He can't speak for several awful seconds, his mouth dry and his entire body tingling with the disgusted revulsion of not only being *touched* , but being touched by someone he hates, someone who's hurt him, someone who he used to *trust* .

He swallows hard. "What *kind* of deal?"

He raises an eyebrow, the one cut with a white scar. He grins, showing off sharp teeth that he's *sure* he didn't have when they were kids. "You know, I've always found you really attractive."

The tingling feeling mingles with the cold from before, and he's sure he's trembling. The implication is awful, something he can't even imagine.

"Here's what I'm proposing," he says, in a hush now, leaning down slightly so he can speak almost directly in his ear. "You *lay down* for me, you don't *fight* , and I'll leave you and your little family alone." He slides his hand up his hip, underneath his shirt, and rests his fingerless-gloved hand on the bare skin of his side.

He takes a slow, deep breath, fighting down fear and horror and disgust. "And if I refuse?" His words are equally soft.

He digs his nails into his skin. He's now so close that his lips brush his ear, making him shiver, when he says, "Then I'll go after your family."

He chokes at the implication.

"Tommy is my type, really, and Ranboo is so *cute* . And Wilbur and Niki are both so *pretty* ." He brushes a kiss against his temple, as his knee nudges his legs apart, so he can shove his thigh between his own. He presses it against him in such a way that he's breathless for a moment. "And I know I could make Philza cry *beautifully* for me--"

" *I'll do it* , " Techno gasps out, hands jerking within his hold. Dream draws back, brows furrowed. They raise as he grins. "Don't touch them."

"Are you sure?" He presses, smile achingly sweet and false. "I would be perfectly happy with any of the others. I bet Niki and Ranboo would scream. Wilbur probably likes it rough." His hand drags up higher, bringing his shirt with it, and he rests his palm on the right side of his chest. His thumb sweeps over his surgery scar and he tries not to gag. "Tommy's so cute when he's crying, it would be even better while I'm fucking him. And I bet Phil would take just about *anything* I gave him. He's so *strong* ."

His stomach sweeps with nausea at the touches and the words. It takes everything he has not to shove him away and choke him to death against the floorboards. "I'm sure. I'll do it."

"Really? You'll trade your body for their safety?" He presses his thigh against him in a slow, circular movement. It almost hurts.

He nods, a little too aggressively. He feels like he's being dragged into some unfathomably deep ocean with every movement, by chains or cold hands or something *worse* . "Yes. As long as you... stay true to your word."

"Excellent. You care about them so much, don't you." He releases his wrists. They already feel bruised, even with the leather of his braces protecting them.

He steps away with a broad smile on his face, and something dark in his eyes. "Show me to your bedroom?"

-

As soon as they're both standing in the dim of the loft, Dream pulls him into a kiss.

Techno doesn't know what to *do* , here.

He's never had sex, at least not... consensually , because it doesn't appeal to him. He decided at about sixteen that the only thing his body is going to be used for is acts of violence and farming. Sex is just... not for him. He's kissed a few people (he kissed *Dream* once, actually) but that was more out of *curiosity* than *desire* .

He doesn't seem to care about his clear inexperience, his mouth moving over his without pause, his hands roaming his body over and just under his clothes. He supposes this is meant to feel nice, but all he can focus on is how much he *hates* being touched by anyone who he

doesn't *trust* . When his tongue sweeps through his mouth, it stings, but he's not sure if that's just his disgust talking.

Dream allows him to pull away. His lips are wet with saliva and tingling oddly, and their parting makes a strange, wet sound. He's a bit disgusted.

"Get undressed," he demands in a voice that he thinks is supposed to be sultry and arousing. He just thinks he sounds stupid. "Take everything off."

Techno hesitates a second too long, fingers wrapped in the hem of his shirt, and he raises an eyebrow, pulling out his knife. "Do I have to... encourage you?"

He shakes his head, wordless with a low level terror. The voices are oddly quiet. (Perhaps they remember this kind of situation.)

He's not wearing much, considering he was just spending the day inside. He undoes the laces on his top and pulls it off, and the jewelry he was wearing follows.

He can feel his eyes on his chest, ogling the healed scar along the left side.

He halts his progress in getting undressed, stepping in close and ghosting a fingertip down the length of the scar. He shivers. "That anvil really did a number on you, huh?" He asks, low and dangerous. "Does it still hurt?"

He shakes his head, not allowing any hint of a lie to show on his face. "Hard to breathe, though, sometimes." He waits until he steps back to unlace his braces and set them on his nightstand.

"I won't play too rough with you, then." He grins, green eyes flashing in the low light. "Or maybe I will. Do you like that?"

He unbuttons his pants and pulls them off, tossing them aside carelessly. "I don't, but does it matter?"

"Not particularly. But if you cooperate, I'll make it fun for both of us."

"I'm asexual," Techno says dryly, ignoring the weight of his gaze on his mostly-naked body. He hooks a thumb in the band of his underwear.

He's only standing in his briefs and his socks, the crown-printed ones Phil got for him. He feels ridiculous and small and oddly humiliated, and he blinks to banish the first sting of tears in his eyes. "I don't *care* what you do. Just... get it over with."

He takes off the last of his clothing and stands now in nothing but hair and skin and the gold in his ears.

Dream steps in close again, tracing a hand up from the very bottom of his belly to the hollow of his throat.

He inhales sharply as his palm rests against his neck, nothing more than the weight of a hand, but it feels like so *much* .

He's aware that he's tense and hot all over with disgust and-- well. He's not looking into it, yet.

He leans in and brushes a kiss along his mouth, up his right tusk, then to the apple of his cheek. "Get on the bed, on your back," he murmurs, voice still low, and it's enough to make him shiver again.

He follows the order as willingly as he can. He lays out on top of the covers, his head resting on a pillow. Briefly, he thinks of how odd it feels to lay completely naked on top of his blankets.

He tries hard not to look at Phil's bed, across the room. He's doing this for him, for all of them. He can't let Dream hurt them, so he's... *doing this* .

Dream settles between his legs, nudging them apart with his body, and lays his (bare, now) hand on his thigh. It makes him jump slightly-- he can't think of a time that anyone save himself touched that lightly-furred skin like that..

He grins down at him. "Eager," he teases. He can't help but roll his eyes.

He looks him over, from head to-- *thighs* , but his attention is caught by something at his side. "What's this?"

He reaches over and grabs Marnie, from where her soft body had settled against his side.

Techno bites his tongue to restrain an instinctive whine.

"Aw, this is cute," he coos, turning the plush over in his hand. "I remember this, actually. I knew you had a soft side under all of that armor, Techno." Fear grips him and his heart jumps when Dream drifts his hand over his knife. "How upset would you be if I tore this open?"

Techno swallows a very small sob. "V-very." He curses his voice for breaking.

"Really?" He asks, raising the knife to rest it's sharp (so *sharp*) tip against Marnie's plush stomach. "Interesting."

It's so stupid, that this *small* thing is making him so upset when he's being *coerced into sex* , but tears roll down his cheeks and he fists his hand in the blue quilt underneath him.

" *Please don't.* " His voice is pitifully small.

Don't hurt her!

Plush friend!!!

Kill him for trying it

Kill him!

"Begging already," he tuts, "you've let yourself get soft *and* desperate, Technoblade." But he puts Marnie down, setting her against Techno's hip again, and he draws in a sharp breath of relief. "Fine, I won't fuck up your toy. You might need something to hold onto, I don't know."

Dream grabs something from his pocket. When his hand trails down his hip this time, his fingers are slick with something, and he drags it further, brushing against the soft hair on his inner thighs and then spreading him open.

The tip of a calloused finger presses against his hole, and slides inside.

Techno stops paying attention. He fixes his eyes on the beamed ceiling, the flicker of the sunlight on the walls. His hand slides around Marnie's soft body and holds her closer to his side.

He tries to think of different things.

Niki went to the village to buy new clothes and things for baking. Phil took the boys fishing for the day. Wilbur... he said something about going to L'manberg...

Tommy has been asking how to properly fight with a sword, or with his scythe. Maybe he should do that. He's well enough to teach him by now.

God, it's been *ages* since he got to teach anyone. The last time... he might've given some very basic lessons while they were preparing to fight for L'manberg, in Pogtopia, but that was only surface-level training, only when they had time around everything else. He likes teaching, though. It's fun. (When he was younger, that was his future plan. To become a teacher. That got derailed, but he still looks back on that idea fondly.)

Maybe Niki will bring something back for him. They all give him things pretty often, and even though it flusters him beyond belief, it's-- it's *nice*. He likes getting gifts of all kinds, and he's sure they've noticed. It makes him feel... loved. And he always gets to return the kindness.

He needs to finish that shirt Niki gave him to mend, and a few other torn garments. His sewing kit is downstairs on the bookshelf. He should... do that, when he's... done with this.

Hair brushes against the inside of one of Techno's thighs. He jolts, eyes flashing down.

Dream is laying between his legs, one hand resting on his thigh and the other fingering him open like a knife boring into flesh.

Apparently feeling his gaze on him, bright-green eyes blink up at him, and he grins with sharp teeth.

He leans in and kisses his thigh, open and wet. A disturbing warmth fills his stomach as he trails his mouth further up his thigh, his fingers curling inside of him and rubbing across something that makes him twitch. He sucks and mouths to leave marks and the tiny shocks of pain aren't enough to quell the heat.

He uses his free thumb to spread him open a little better and drags the flat of his tongue over his dick. It makes his hips twitch... and it stings a little?

He closes his eyes tightly. He goes back to his thoughts.

Phil keeps insisting he needs to at *least* trim his hair. Which is probably true, it's been a while since he's done even that much, and despite how meticulously he takes care of his hair, he has dry, split ends all over.

He'll get Niki to cut it, maybe. He trusts her with blades close to his neck as much as he trusts Phil.

His legs are manhandled into a different position, both over Dream's shoulders. He licks at him, tongue pressing between his own fingers, along sensitive flesh that he didn't even *know* was that sensitive. Vaguely, he's aware that his spit stings him and that somehow makes it *better* .

It's only through amazing self control that Techno doesn't moan or make some other pitiful noise.

It doesn't feel *terrible* , and that's the worst part. It feels *good* . The knot of heat in his belly is reminiscent of the (very) few times he's been aroused enough to masturbate, and he doesn't like the *implications* of that.

Dream's hand wraps around his hip, long fingers splayed out on the small of his back, digging into the fur that trails up his spine from the base of his tail. He shudders lightly as his nails scratch at the sensitive skin, as he continues to mouth and kiss and lick at him. It feels so *good* .

He digs his claws into the quilt and tries to breathe evenly, to not pant like an animal. He can ignore his body-- he does it *all the fucking time* .

The physical pleasure means fucking nothing. It's simple nerve impulses and stimuli and all kinds of stupid biological things. It's just like-- before. It's just like before, it means nothing.

It means nothing.

It means nothing when the muscles in his thighs tremble.

It means nothing when the arousal rises and curls in a tight fever pitch of maddening heat.

It means nothing when the hand that hasn't found itself wrapped around Marnie goes down to wrap in soft, blonde hair, to tug him closer.

It means *nothing* , nothing at all, when Dream sucks his cock with an incongruent gentleness even though it still hurts, and crooks his fingers just so inside of him, and he tips over the edge.

For a horrible-amazing moment, Techno hears himself let out a *squeal* , feels himself squirm and rock his hips against Dream's mouth, feels himself chase the aftershocks of pleasure.

It's. Been a while since he's even had an orgasm, if he's being honest. He feels disturbingly empty-headed from the feelings and sensations and a kind of low nausea deep in his stomach that he isn't sure how to explain.

His hand is still in Dream's hair. His breathing is uneven and he can't quite stop twitching. He's vaguely aware that his chest hurts; he must have agitated his ribs somehow.

Dream sits up, face flushed, his chin and the lower part of his cheeks wet. Techno blinks uncomprehendingly at the slickness on his skin.

His legs are moved so they're resting around his hips. He can't move, he feels heavy and he's still twitching. His cunt is stinging and tingling and it hurts, is it-- *supposed* to feel like that?

"Did that feel good?" Dream asks in a breathless, teasing voice. Techno doesn't know why he nods, but it makes him give an open mouthed grin and squeeze his hip. "Knew I could make you like it." In a quieter voice, he mutters, "*asexual*", he says."

He thinks he should probably be annoyed by the comment, but his brain still feels heavy and empty from the rush of feelings and memories.

After some shifting, Dream squeezes his hip again and presses in close to him. "Ready?" His cock presses up against him, and, oh. He's. Bigger, than he expected.

He doesn't wait for an answer.

It *hurts*. All traces of pleasure are knocked out of him at the pain, sharp and strong and nauseating.

It's comparable to being stabbed, only so, *so much worse*. It's rough and it's slick and it *aches* and it's like his body is aware that he's never wanted this, recent orgasm be damned, because he keeps jerking and trying to pull away, only held in place by his hands on his hips.

He's doing this to keep his family safe.

Right. He can bear this temporary pain in favor of keeping them safe, right. It's a good thing, what he's doing. This humiliation, this aching torment... it's to keep his family, his *pack*, safe.

Dream leans down and kisses him again. He can taste-- himself, on his lips. Techno is tempted, so tempted, and not by the voices this time, to just wrap his hands around his neck and choke him to death. Or snap his neck cleanly, no blood to clean, just a body to despawn.

But that would just invite further violence, further pain, and he's been around long enough to know that he wouldn't be given this deal again. He wouldn't have a second chance. Dream would go after his family, after Wilbur, Niki, Phil, *Ranboo and Tommy*-- oh god, *he can't let that happen*.

He moves, and it's *wrong*. It feels so wrong. How is this supposed to feel *good*? He feels like... like he's *choking* on it, his body feels too *small* for this, like he's still fifteen and crying over the blood god's altar.

Oh god, he shouldn't have thought about that.

He sobs without realizing how hard he's *apparently* been crying, and his chest stings with a horrible pain that makes it worse. He can barely breathe for the awful full feeling and the ache in his chest and hips and groin. He clutches Marnie to his chest, trying to draw any comfort he can from the plush.

"You're so fucking *pretty* when you cry," Dream observes. One of his hands is pressed against him, his thumb rubbing circles on his cock. His face is nestled against his hair and he's kissing at his ear, every kiss like a knife with the sharp shocks of pleasure.

He wants to yank away from the contact, from everything, the overstimulation *hurts* , but he's frozen, stuck in more ways than one.

It would be so easy. To raise his hands to wrap around his neck. To press his thumbs in just the right place. To jerk just so...

The idea is far more pleasurable than what's happening, at least.

How he's thrusting into him with little regard for his pain. How he seems to be *determined* to keep making him feel pleasure.

Dream's hands wrap around his neck and tighten to the point of choking. Techno gasps stupidly and grabs his right wrist, fingers wrapping around it and nails digging into his skin.

He can't see much between tears and choking, but he thinks he might be grinning.

The very edges of his vision begin to blur. His grip slackens on his wrist, and he's just present enough to want to laugh at the irony of him being choked to death after his own violent fantasies today.

His grip finally loosens just after his already sore chest begins to truly ache. He draws in a few deep, coughing breaths, before realizing he's sobbing, caught between that and moaning.

"That sounds so good, firework," he purrs, gripping his hips now. "Make more of those pretty noises for me."

He isn't sure what happens then. He starts drifting away, like he tends to do when things are especially bad. It might be from being choked, if he thinks about it.

All he knows is that he stops being able to feel where he's fucking into him, where he's being for all intents and purposes *stabbed* , and everything is replaced by a fuzzy, grey place inside of his mind, where he thankfully can't feel anything.

-

When he was eighteen, he was arrested. On real charges, once again.

Instead of being dragged into a prison cell, he was dragged into a superior officer's home.

He was forced into handcuffs enchanted with the curse of binding, and thrown onto a plush bed.

Even at eighteen he was still gangly and skinny, despite years of training and his well-known fighting prowess-- he wouldn't put on enough weight to *look* strong for a while.

The people who arrested him seemed to like that.

He spent *five days* in that ornate bedroom, forced over every surface there, enjoyed and torn apart by three men.

They tortured him in other ways, too. Barely any food, only enough water to be functional. Constant noise. Frigid water poured on him if he fell asleep.

A mock execution, where they slit just the *skin* of his throat. He still has a scar from that.

By the time they broke the cuffs, Techno was completely dead to it. He was sitting in the corner of the room, forcing himself to stay awake. Everything was aching and his stomach was full of nausea for days.

(He vomited the first day and they. Didn't like that.)

He was washed thoroughly, *very* thoroughly, fed a potion to dull his pain enough to move, and turned back out in the same clothes he arrived in. He felt ridiculous under the heavy fabric of his cape and the crown on his head.

He went home. Phil was pacing the kitchen, dressed as if he was about to go out, face dark with rage.

Techno stood in their doorway. He had cold sweat all over his body from the pain (the potion didn't take it away, just barely dulled it) and he couldn't help how tears rolled down his cheeks. He felt like a child again, like he had gotten hurt playing too hard outside and needed his skinned knees cleaned and his scraped hands kissed.

He felt *small* .

“Dad?” He asked, drawing Phil's attention.

His head snapped up, eyes wide, his mouth falling open at the sight of him.

Visually, he looked normal; his long sleeves and pants and cape covered all the marks that were left on him.

But he's only ever called him *dad* when he's feeling too much to pretend he doesn't need him.

He was pulled into the house. Phil sat him down on the edge of the bathtub and checked him for wounds— they were mostly bruises, hickies if he's being crass. They had been careful, really, in not damaging his skin too much, nor his genitals.

They had been. Less careful about using protection.

“None of them,” Techno started, throat tight with emotion. “*none of them* used condoms.”

Phil’s eyes sharpened with rage and then softened with grief.

He was lucky, though. Phil knew the potionmaker in their nearest town, and she helped them get a potion that would... get rid of any chance of pregnancy. There wasn’t a good one anyway, considering his nature as a Nether hybrid, they’re consistently infertile or near it, not to mention the hormones he had been taking.

But there was still a *chance* , and he didn’t want to risk it. Ever.

So he took the potion as soon as Phil brought it home, and that was it.

-

Techno is hit with a wave of freezing cold reality.

Dream sinks his sharp teeth into his shoulder, as he strokes him just right, and-- and oh god no, fuck--

The shame is so strong it makes him let out a feral scream, a death cry.

But regardless, he still just-- he just *falls over that edge again* , fuck, he jerks up against his touch and moans weakly, voice wrecked from crying and making horrible noises.

He keeps thrusting into him, keeps stroking his cock, and he continues to sob and make noises more piglin than human as the overstimulation builds, stronger this time. It's like a sensory overload with far more pain.

He doesn't stop for a few more minutes, his movements getting more and more erratic, low groans and huffed breaths leaving his mouth.

When he finally does stop, he's settled *deep* inside of him and he can feel him twitching against something he definitely *should not be touching with anything* and it's *hot* and-- and--

He drifts back into the grey, just a little.

Dream pulls out and he's not sure why he still feels so much pain inside.

Awareness comes slowly.

He's aware that his whole body feels sticky with sweat. There's blood on Dream's teeth. There's a disturbing amount of wetness between his legs and all over his thighs.

He's. Oh, he's obviously bleeding, right?

(It's better if it's blood.)

Techno lays on his back, clinging to Marnie with both arms, and cries, unable to stop, greyness clouding the edges of his mind.

"You were surprisingly good for me," Dream observes, pulling away, sitting on the edge of the bed. He didn't get undressed-- his belt and pants are just undone, and that's somehow more absurd and uncomfortable than the blood (*please be blood please be blood*) on his thighs. "You felt so wonderful around me. And you're so *pretty* ."

He stares up at the ceiling without blinking. His shoulder hurts. His lower body aches, from hips to knees. He feels sick and his whole body feels heavy

He leans over him and forces yet another kiss, too harsh, intertwining one hand in his hair and using the other to fondle his chest, rub his hip, dip between his legs.

He lets it happen, contenting himself with vague fantasies of sinking his teeth into his tongue and ripping it from his mouth, letting him choke on his own blood.

"Take care of yourself, Techno," he says.

And then he leaves.

Techno isn't quite sure how long he lays there. Long enough that blood (*only* blood, nothing else) begins to dry, sticky and disgusting.

He pushes himself out of bed.

As soon as he stands, his legs give out, and he spends a good while just kneeling weakly on the floor, crying like a child.

He has to get up and get clean before they get home. No one can see him like this. He'd rather die.

He finally stumbles around the room to grab fresh clothes, and then drops himself weakly to the lower floor. His book and half-finished coffee and browning apple slices are still on the table. Dream is actually gone, thank god.

He goes to the bathroom, locks the door securely.

Maybe unwisely, he looks at himself in the mirror.

Horror sets in at just how *wrecked* he looks.

His shoulder is bleeding, bruised teeth marks and punctures set just above his collarbone.

His face is splotchy and flushed. His eyes are bloodshot and glassy. His hair is tangled and sticking out at all angles, plastered to his temples with sweat.

His wrists are bruised-- when did Dream hold them that tight?-- and there are various other bruises all over his torso, painting him in shades of pink and red and purple. There are harsh,

hand-shaped bruises on his hips, his thighs, his *neck* . The edges of his execution scar are irritated.

The blood on the inside of his thighs is thick and not just-- red. It's... mostly white or transparent, if he's being honest.

He vomits. He doesn't have the energy to fight it down-- he just pushes his hair out of the way and lets himself get sick. He curls up on the floor next to the toilet and empties his stomach, the little he ate for breakfast and last night's dinner leaving him.

By the time he's done, he's shaking violently and barely able to do more than cry.

He starts the shower. He gets in and just sits on the floor of the bathtub, staring at the wall. It's too cold and it numbs his battered body, like it's washing away the whole horrible event.

It was a good thing. Noble, really. Protecting his family from that same kind of horror. They don't even need to know what he did.

He struggles up to his feet, legs shaking like a newborn fawn. He washes his body without noticing how long it takes.

Blood drips down to the bathtub floor, and is dragged into the drain with the rest of the water and the soap bubbles.

He has to sit down again after a few minutes. His legs won't stop trembling and he can't stop the horrible, choking sobs that keep leaving him.

He feels *disgusting* . No amount of scrubbing is *ever* going to get him clean. Maybe the state he was in after the ruins was a blessing-- after he was clean, he felt *mostly* fine, because his mind was barely there.

(He didn't tell Phil what happened for weeks. Mostly because he couldn't speak, but also because it felt... wrong. Taboo. To think that Dream could do that to him.

He eventually told him when his period was late and he panicked. It turned out it was just a case of his hormones being fucked up from the fact that he's a hybrid, but he had spilled the whole truth in fear.

He spent most of that night sitting curled up against Phil, crying into his shirt, terrified.)

He's still fucking *bleeding* . It swirls in elegant pink-red curls in the water, turns the soap suds pink.

He doesn't know what to do. Has he *ever* really known? He had prepared for so many kinds of violence-- even sexual violence to a degree, though never with Dream as the attacker, *never again* . The nameless police were bad enough.

Maybe he should have known it would happen again. Dream has always been-- touchy. During fights he grabs at hips and hands and arms more than he should.

Once, in the middle of a fight, he had pinned Techno to the ground on his stomach, hips raised, and when he tried to muscle his way out of his grip, he had grabbed his tail and *pulled* .

It fucking hurt. He instinctively whimpered from the pain-- he couldn't help it-- and Dream chuckled, pressing a kiss to the back of his head before pulling away and seemingly disappearing before he could turn over.

He shivers.

He turns up the heat of the water.

He washes himself a second time. He's particularly gentle between his legs; the damage is surface-level, as far as he can tell. Just tearing around the entrance, bleeding so much because of increased blood flow.

From *physical arousal* . He shudders.

Dream made him *feel*— fuck, no, he can't think about the pleasure he felt or he's going to... do something bad. He's not sure what yet.

(He really hopes it's nothing internal. He... can't really check right now.)

There seem to be what almost feels like... burns, as well? Places where it almost seems like his flesh was... he has no idea what to compare it to. But it's definitely causing him to feel raw and sore and to continue to *bleed* .

He runs a finger along the scar on his throat, then along the one on his wrist.

In the ruins, he had barely known what was happening. He was fifteen and only knew what sex was through scenes in books and a *very* awkward conversation he had with Philza. He knew enough to know it was for reproduction and pleasure, neither of which he was particularly interested in, at that age or now.

Dream had shoved him over the altar. They had never been evenly matched in strength, and he was bigger than him overall, and Techno was weak with the new influence of screaming voices in his head.

Those voices had soothed him as he was violated. Their tones were gentle, like they were comforting a small child. In a way, they were.

It's okay , they whispered as his pants were pulled down to his knees, his underwear torn. *You'll be okay. Just listen to us.*

They began to sing something unintelligible and sweet when his blunt head shoved its way inside of him. His hand was on the back of his neck and his face was pressed hard against the obsidian.

Techno realizes he can't even cry anymore, he's just choking on shallow breaths.

He can't-- he can't *think* about it anymore. He needs to categorize and compartmentalize what happened or he's going to lose his mind, fully break down like he did after the execution, and *god* he can't go through that again, not when the situation is still so awful with his family.

He needs to be strong, he needs to protect them. It's all he's good at.

He washes himself once more. He tries not to choke even more when he has to use his *fingers* to clean himself of...

He's not going to keep thinking about it.

He washes himself clean, this time, on autopilot. He rinses away the last of the soap, and turns off the water.

He lets the cool air in the bathroom settle against his skin before he steps out, quickly drying off. He's only gentle with himself so as to not further aggravate the wounds.

He cleans them diligently, and even runs a cloth soaked with healing potion between his legs.

The rush of relief from the pain is enough like pleasure that he instinctively gags and has to cling to the sink for a long moment, dizzy with nausea. The pain is gone but he feels *sick* because he's thinking about Dream's warm mouth against him, licking and kissing and *sucking*--

It passes, and he covers all of his wounds.

He gets dressed, strategically arranging his clothes to hide any bruised skin. The bite mark and bruises on his throat are hardest, but the shirt he grabbed has a higher collar and it hides them fairly well. If anyone sees them, he'll lie and say something else happened.

He doesn't want to tell them. He's not *going* to tell them. Even if they *ask*, he's not going to tell them what happened, because if he does, he'll *cry*, and he doesn't want to cry over this anymore.

Next time Dream shows up, I'm just going to kill him.

-

Dream's base is neatly carved into the side of a mountain, carefully tucked away from prying eyes.

He had a house, a normal house with normal rooms and a decent bed and a kitchen where he could cook to his heart's content, but he-- the demon, rather-- abandoned it after George ran off.

He sits on the cold stone-and-concrete floor. He's still dressed, but he feels hideously naked.

He didn't see *all* of it. His awareness ebbs and flows, sometimes watching everything like he's the one doing it, sometimes only aware of pain or other sensations, sometimes only

hearing it.

He heard the demon proposition Techno. He heard them *kissing* .

("I don't-- *get it* ," Techno said, throwing his hands up. "It sounds gross!")

"It's *fun* ," Dream replied, with a bright grin on his face.

"How do *you* know? Who would kiss you?"

His grin widened and he simply shook his head. He snorted in displeased amusement and shoved him with his shoulder.

"I bet *you* would kiss me," he remarked. "Wanna try it?"

He scrunched up his nose and stuck out his tongue. "No, gross."

" *Ouch* , Techno."

"It's not you, it just-- kissin' sounds gross. I'm not goin' to kiss *anyone* ."

"Fine, then."

-

"Hey."

"Mmh? What time is it?"

"Doesn't matter. Remember how we were, uhm, talkin' about... kissin' people, the other day?"

"Yeah...?"

"Yeah, uh. Can we try that?"

"...sure."

...

"I was right. That was gross." Techno frowned, before shrugging. "Thanks. Goodnight." He rolled over and cuddled himself back into his blankets.

Dream smothered his laughter in a pillow.)

He heard Techno snarking at him while he was undressing. He heard his sharp inhalation when he dragged a hand up his chest.

He felt it as they settled between Techno's spread legs. He felt it as his arms moved to threaten his plush pig with a knife.

("Her name is Marnie," Techno informed him a million years ago. He was sitting cross-legged on his bed, the plush on his lap, his hand resting on her head. "Wilbur gave her to me when I was a little younger."

"Kinda on the nose."

"Hush.")

He felt it when the demon slicked his fingers with oil and pushed them into Techno's body. He felt it as his warm walls twitched and tightened around the digits.

He heard it as it perched between his legs and went down on him, licking and mouthing at him with *obscene* noises that made him want to be sick. He heard it when Techno let out small strained noises of pleasure, and then genuine moans as he came, thighs trembling and trying to close around it's head. He heard the way he squealed and felt the way he tugged at his hair.

And when he-- when the demon pushed into him, it's cock shoving into his still tight, *tight* hole, he felt as if he was the one doing it.

He wanted to shove himself away from awareness, but he was *stuck* . He has no idea quite how much control the demon has over his level of consciousness, but he's sure it was *keeping him there*, forcing him to feel *all of it* .

Techno was crying. Crying and clinging to the plush-- Marnie, of course it has a name, he's always *loved* naming things-- and it was just thrusting relentlessly into him. Dream would feel how he was trying to jerk away, how tight his body felt around him.

The worst part-- the worst part is that it felt *good* . In a physical sense, at least. He hadn't been touched in any way in so *long* , not while he was aware of it. And if he ignored the crying, the whole context, Techno felt warm and tight and *good* around him, and the pleasure of it all made his vision blurry.

He was speaking. *It* was speaking, in Dream's voice, with Dream's inflections.

"You're so *good* for me, firework," it panted, running its hands from his hips up to his chest and then back down to his thighs. It dug its claws in and he could feel how Techno jolted, could hear him crying out, could feel him clench around it. His head tilted back, showing off his neck, marked with scars and bruises. "Always so good, and so pretty. Maybe I should *really* take you home with me, this time."

Dream felt himself-- his actual self, his consciousness-- rear back in horror. All he wanted in that moment was to take control and somehow stop it from going any further. It's already gone too far, but if he can stop it from *finishing* ...

But he couldn't. His attempts were completely fruitless. He's weak, helpless, *useless* .

"I'm sorry," he said in his head, staring down at his best friend's shaking, naked form. He still looked fifteen, so small and hurt. "I'm sorry, Tech, I'm so *sorry*-- "

Shut up, the demon snarled at him, and he felt a sensation like being yanked back slightly in their mind. **Stop your whining and just *enjoy it*. You're lucky I'm even letting you know it's happening.**

Dream curls up a little better into himself. He digs both hands into his hair and yanks at the strands.

When it left him, Techno was laying in bed, staring at the ceiling without moving or blinking. One of his arms was wrapped securely around Marnie, and the other had it's hand fisted in the blue quilt underneath him.

There was blood and-- and-- *other things* , on his thighs.

He tugs harder at his hair and the pain draws him back to the current time, not the terrible thing that the demon did using his body.

He pulls his legs up to his chest, hugging them close in a pale imitation of comfort. He needs a shower-- fuck, he needs a shower, he feels so *dirty*-- but he can't get up. He can't imagine just going about his day, now.

"Why did you do that?" He asks in a whisper, staring at the wall. "You... *we* hurt Techno enough. You didn't need to do that."

There's silence in their head for a long time.

I was *hungry* , it replies simply.

He scowls, anger beginning to overwhelm his disgust and grief and guilt. "So you... you..." he swallows roughly, spitting out the words, "you *raped* my best friend. Because you were *hungry* ."

Oh, Dream, it purrs. He can feel it's low laugh as if it's his own. He digs his nails against his scalp. **He's not your *best friend* anymore. He hates you. He wants you dead, especially *now* .**

He gets up from the floor and begins pacing, taking his knife from his thigh and compulsively twirling it between his fingers. (When did he pick up that habit, again? He feels like he should know.) "He *should* hate me. I got him cursed, I let you ruin his life-- I let you do *that* to him! *More than once!* "

The knife nicks his finger and he transfers it to the other hand, pressing his bleeding finger against his hoodie.

(There's already blood on this hoodie. And... other fluids.)

(*Fuck.*)

Don't forget, you tortured his little brother to the point of considering suicide. It sounds all too pleased by his distress. *Fucker* . It's just being fed by his rage, but he can't fight it

down. **And you told someone to cut off his older brother's wings. Remember that? How they all screamed? All those *pretty* white feathers, soaked in blood...**

"Shut up," he snaps. "Shut up, that wasn't-- that wasn't *me* ! That was *you* ! I tried to stop you, you shut me out! You're the hungry *bastard* who feeds on misery--"

Mm, but they all *think* it was you. It chuckles again, cruel and dark. **They all think *you're* the monster.**

He throws his knife down and storms to the bathroom. He doesn't look in the mirror as he undresses.

There are cuts on his shoulders. At some point, Techno must have scratched them.

(He deserves it.)

He starts the shower.

You know, Techno asked for it, it says casually, as he cleans the scratches. **The bitch begged for it. You should have felt how he practically *sucked* me in. He *deserved* it.**

Dream digs his nails into his arm, dragging over old scars and drawing a tiny line of blood. His nails are sharper now. "He didn't. *No one* deserves that. And I know he didn't ask for it, you pressured him. I *heard* it."

Hmm. Would you rather I hurt the children? Its voice is light with amusement.

He throws the cloth he was using to clean his wounds into the laundry. "If you so much as lay a *hand* on any of the kids on this server, I'll *find* a way to exorcise you." His own voice is cold, colder than he knew it could get.

God, if he could drag this fucker into the mortal world, he'd tear it's stupid four-armed body to shreds. Burn it to ash. Break every fucking bone in it's disgusting form.

(There's fear in his voice too, though.

Tubbo is still so *small* , from the glimpses he's gotten of him. He wouldn't be able to handle it, even just *physically* .

Tommy is... he doesn't even want to revisit the thoughts the demon shared with him some nights, while they were watching him sleep. **How much convincing do you think it would take him to let me fuck his throat? He's so pretty when he cries.**

It's shown little interest in Fundy, which he's taking as a good thing. He's pretty sure the kid wouldn't be able to take whatever it would plan for him.

Purpled is hiding *somewhere* , clever kid that he is. He doesn't think even the demon knows where. But he knows that he wouldn't be able to handle what he *thinks* is his big brother hurting him like that.

And Ranboo... god. They've already hurt Ranboo enough.)

You're so noble, it drawls.

He gets into the shower, and immediately begins just... scrubbing. There's blood in places he doesn't want to think about. The water isn't the cleanest, and it's *cold* , but at least it works to get him clean.

I'm not too interested in them. Well, maybe the little bird--

" *Tommy* ," he corrects irritably. He *hates* that fucking nickname. It's dehumanizing, like he's treating the boy as a pet. And Tommy is *no one's* pet, Dream is sure of that.

Fine. I'm interested in *Tommy* , a bit, but not for pleasure. I remember what happened last time.

He rinses out his washcloth and scowls at the pinkened foam of the soap.

Early on, they had met Ranboo. He had been eleven or so, while Dream had... well, *presumably* he had turned seventeen at some point, while he wasn't in control.

And Ranboo was just... *sweet* . Innocent, despite his nature as a hostile mob hybrid. Curious. Affection-starved to an extreme degree.

The demon used that against him.

It was apparently very easy to manipulate the poor, desperate enderling into staying around them, a convenient snack whenever it got hungry. (It also wanted to use him as a *host* , but the idea makes Dream so angry even now that he can't think about it.)

The affection started normal enough. Hair-ruffles, pats on the back, helping him adjust his form while practicing his swordplay.

And then kissing on the forehead. Its hands lingering while adjusting his limbs. Kisses on the cheek. Hands resting on his hips.

Hands resting on his thighs. A hand on his chest when resting an arm around his shoulders, casual enough to be unnoticeable. Kisses on the neck.

It was slow enough that he didn't notice how intimate the contact was for a while.

It reaped the rewards of its slow grooming one night, during a thunderstorm. Ranboo was lying next to it, already-lanky limbs curled up to his body, eyes half-closed.

It turned over, facing him, and took his face between its palms to kiss him.

He made a confused little noise in response, a muffled chirp, but allowed the contact, even parting his lips hesitantly when it prodded them with its tongue.

And it escalated into... touching. Dream had begun to get awareness at that point, vague sensations, mostly sounds.

He could hear Ranboo making small noises, nothing more than tiny whimpers.

He could feel warm skin under his hands. Soft, light fur, gently being pet as the boy's clothes were removed. Something hot and slick against his fingers. That same warmth wrapped around the tip of his cock.

He realized what was *really* happening when Ranboo let out a panicked screech, grabbing its wrist and using his claws to scratch at it.

Because it was trying to fuck him.

Before he knew it, he almost didn't feel the demon's influence anymore. He had shoved it away, into the very back of their shared mind, and he was completely in control.

He came to with Ranboo on his lap, facing away from him, one hand wrapped around his flicking tail, mid-tug. Ranboo was naked from the waist down, and he had his free arm around his body, his hand-- over *him* .

His fingers were wet. Something was squirming against them. A tentacle of some kind, maybe.

And he was still an inch inside of him.

He reared back in horror when that registered. As gently as he could, he pulled out, pulled away from the small boy.

He had tended to him as best he could. He had a long set of clawmarks on his chest-- apparently while grabbing his chest, it had scratched him, and it was bleeding with bright, bright green blood.

He soothed him as well, or tried to. He didn't want to be touched or held or even *looked at* , curling into a ball under a blanket and sobbing.

Dream couldn't blame him. He wouldn't want to be touched by anyone after that, let alone the... the person who *did* it.

"I can't leave because of the storm," he informed him hesitantly, watching him as he curled up tighter and sobbed louder. "But I'll... I'll stay away from you, okay?"

He received a lot of scared ender mumbling in response, but he's pretty sure the message was something like "*don't touch me ever again*".

Which was... *fair* .

(It still broke his heart.)

"I'll do it again," he mutters in the present, rinsing soap off his body. "You couldn't take control again for *days*."

Yes, I remember it well.

He remembers it too. He had felt like himself, had felt *free* , for a total of five days.

Ranboo wouldn't look at him, even when he had to stay longer than planned because the storm didn't let up, and even when it did, it was too wet out to travel.

He just... silently went about his day, not touching him, never looking his way, never speaking. He walked with a small limp for the first day, but after that, he seemed fine, if it wasn't for the always fresh tear tracks down his face, red and green against black and white skin.

He spent most of the days sitting on the windowseat and staring out the window, face mostly blank save for his teary eyes.

Dream wanted to apologize, but he didn't think it would sound sincere to him.

So, I won't do anything like that to the *children* . Don't worry, baby boy. But Technoblade is fair game. He's an adult, and you're willing to *sacrifice* adults, aren't you?

Dream sighs shakily and rinses out his hair, before turning off the shower.

"Not like that," he whispers. "Do *anything* else to hurt them, but not--" the memory of Techno sobbing as he-- as *it* thrust into him makes him choke. "N-not *that* , please."

He wraps himself in a towel, slumping to the floor next to the tub. "Please," he pleads again, staring at the wall.

Don't you want to be touched? It asks. **You *miss* being touched. I'll let you feel it, all of it.**

There's a long silence.

He finds himself weighing his desire for physical contact against his hatred of letting the demon hurt people like that, and promptly is disgusted by it.

He can't do that. It's fucking... *selfish* of him, to think like that. And he can be selfish, but not to that extreme.

We'll go find your pretty boyfriend, it suggests. I'm sure he misses you. It wouldn't take much convincing to get him in your bed, he's stupid like that. Wouldn't that be nice? I'll even be gentle with him.

Dream brings a hand up to his mouth and bites his thumbnail. All of his nails are ragged and chipped, though painted-- the demon doesn't keep up with them. At least they're clean.

"Please just *leave George alone*, " he says, tired. He misses George so much it causes him physical pain, like someone is taking a knife to his heart. "Are you *ever* satisfied?"

Mmm... I am right *now* , it chuckles darkly. He shudders, crossing his arms over his bare chest. **Orgasms tend to do that to a creature. I bet Technoblade was plenty satisfied when we were finished.**

He closes his eyes, tears sliding down his cheeks, and leans his head back on the tub. "You could have gotten Techno pregnant, you know," he says, faint. "Then what would you do?"

He wouldn't be able to carry it, it assures him, in a stupidly kind tone that actually makes him feel better. **Between being a Nether-born and his... *condition*** , Dream winces at the way he says it-- *for fucks sake, just say the man is trans, you're well aware of that at this point -- he couldn't carry his spawn to term.*

He lets out an annoyed yet relieved sigh. "That's... good, I guess. I wouldn't want him to have to go through that."

He gets up from the floor, feeling faint.

He doesn't deserve to feel so terrible.

It was objectively much fucking worse for Techno. Techno was raped, held down and forced against his will, for the second *fucking* time, by Dream's hands.

It doesn't matter that he was just as much of an unwilling party; to Techno, it *was* him. He did that to him for no good reason, other than getting leverage or hurting someone for the hell of it, someone he used to care about.

He *still* cares about him. So much that it aches, just as bad as his longing for George, maybe even more so. Because Techno reminds him of a time before this, before getting possessed, before his life was ripped from him. Before he was little more than a puppet for a demon who hurts everyone he ever cared about even in passing.

He gets dressed, and wanders to his bed. He sits down on the edge of it and cradles his head in his hands.

"Never do that again," he says weakly. "Not to Techno, not to George, not to *anyone* . Please."

Oh, then I shouldn't tell you what I did to Ranboo, it replies, its tone casual, as if asking for sugar in it's coffee.

His body goes cold and he's suddenly hyper aware of the water dripping off his damp hair, the stone under his feet, the thin mattress he's sitting on.

" *What?* " He asks, slowly.

After he was stabbed, it continues, still casual, **I found him bloody and battered on his kitchen floor. He looked so cute, and if you could *taste* that fear, that distress...** It

practically moans. **So *sweet* .**

He digs his fingers into his wet hair and stares at the floor, paralyzed by it's words.

After you so *rudely* interrupted me, he fell unconscious. And... well, I've always been an opportunist, Dream. It chuckles, and he feels something like cold fingers trailing up his back. He sobs aloud. **His cunt was practically as *sweet* as his fear.**

"Stop," he whimpers. "Just-- please, *stop* . Why would you even..." He buries his face in his palms. "You *said* you wouldn't hurt the kids."

Why haven't you grasped the *facts* , baby boy? It asks, pity dripping off it's words. **I'm a demon . I feed off of misery, fear, distress, anger, sadness. I do things for my own pleasure, my own *hunger* . I don't care who I hurt, who I lie to. And as *that* shows... you can't always *stop* me. So I will continue to do what I desire. Maybe I'll track down one of your brothers...**

Dream lets out a weak groan, something almost undead, and hugs himself, fully sobbing now. "Please don't hurt them. Any of them, but-- especially not my brothers, *please* ..."

You're so cute when you beg. It chuckles. He can imagine the sadistic smile on its face. **You can't really stop me, Dream. I'll do what I want, and if that happens to involve sex...? Well. You can just take solace in the fact that I'm not *actually* interested in your brothers. Maybe my little bird, though... or his little lamb boyfriend. That would be a *sight* , wouldn't it?**

He digs his nails into the bare skin of his arms so hard he bleeds, tearing away strips of flesh. The pain means *nothing* .

He doesn't want this to keep happening. No one here deserves this.

I bet I could convince Technoblade again, it continues, lower, as if it's talking mostly to itself. **He'd do just about *anything* to keep his family safe. I could have him at my beck and call, just to keep his little brood of anarchists from harm... *oh* , what a wonderful fate for the blood god's little vessel...**

Dream claws harder at his arms. The idea of this *thing* breaking Techno down that much makes him want to dig his nails instead into the soft flesh of his own eyes.

" *I need to get rid of you,* " he says through clenched teeth.

Oh, Dream, it purrs. **You can't. I'm *part* of you.**

He manages to scratch deep enough into his left arm that a sizable chunk of flesh comes off, half-lodged under his nail.

He stares at the wall, and swallows hard.

" What would I have to do to convince you to... *n-not* fuck whoever you want?"

It hums in thought. **Mm, that is an interesting question. I can never resist it when you offer me a deal. What's something that would feed me just as much...**

He stares at his bloody hands.

You know, I'm quite fond of Tubbo.

"Do you want me to take his last life?" He's surprised by the steadiness of his own voice. At least it would take the boy out of the pool of victims...

Hm, no. I like his despair a bit too much to lose it forever. A good idea, though...

He lays out on his back on the blankets, too tired to crawl under them. His arms hurt.

Let's forget about the little lamb for now. I think, it drawls, I want you to kill Technoblade.

Dream crosses his arms over his face. "And then you'll be satisfied?" Blood smears on his cheek.

For a time, yes. Your grief and his fear at being killed will feed me for a long time. It sighs happily. You know, he's still at three lives. It will impact him so *strongly* to die...

Tears begin to flow again. "Okay. I'll do it."

Good boy, Dream. I won't control you for it; I want to see how my influence has corrupted you.

He turns over and buries his face in a pillow.

He thinks it might have actually corrupted him.

Because he's completely willing to kill Techno, if it means keeping other people, more *vulnerable* people, safe.

-

Techno settles himself on the couch, and he's able to look entirely normal when everyone gets home.

"Technoblade!" Tommy shouts as soon as he comes through the door. "I got something for you!"

"Did you?" He asks casually, looking up from his book. He poured himself a fresh cup of coffee and he just finished a new plate of apple slices. (He's still frightfully nauseous, but he's fighting it as well as he can. He needs to eat.)

"Yeah! While we were fishing, I kept catching on something th-that definitely wasn't a fish, it had to be something metal, and..." While Tommy is explaining, he's pulling off his cloak and

boots, placing them alongside his scythe. He's grinning, cheeks flushed from the wind outside, looking happier than he has in a while.

He digs in his bag for a minute, before coming over to Techno's side and holding out the object in question.

It's a golden disc, about the size of his palm. Its surface is engraved with words in piglin, he recognizes the symbols immediately, and they surround a depiction of an intact, beautiful bastion. Pieces of nether quartz decorate the edges.

The whole thing is worn down and a bit damaged from being underwater for who knows how long, but...

He has no idea what this is, but it's... oddly beautiful.

He brings it closer when Tommy hands it to him, and inspects the lettering. Something about... home? The characters are too worn to say for sure.

"Isn't it pretty?" Tommy asks proudly. "I don't know what it is, or why I kept almost catching it. It was tangled up in some string stuff, so maybe that's why..."

Techno runs his fingers over the degraded words, a claw dipping into the characters. *Home... heart... the heart of our home...?*

"It's obviously some kind of Nether thing, right? I guessed it from the gold and q-quartz and stuff." Tommy is sitting next to him, subtly bouncing on the couch cushion, grinning. "Do you know what it is?"

He shakes his head, still inspecting the disc. "No, I... I've never seen something like this." His voice comes out odd and cracking.

He's suddenly aware he's on the verge of tears, and blinks furiously to banish them. He can't break down. He *can't*. Especially not over some random artifact his brother gave him.

"You abandoned us to carry all the stuff on our own," Ranboo laments as he comes in the door, carrying a large cloth bag in his arms. "How dare you, Tommy."

Tommy laughs, and for a second, Techno can see the unmarred happiness of a child on his face.

It just makes the choked-up, horrible feeling he has get worse. He's only seventeen, and barely that. He hasn't seen him that happy in... a while. Not even when he gave him his scythe...

"I had a *very* important task," Tommy argues, even as he gets up to help Ranboo with what he's carrying, presumably fish. "I need to give Techno things, or he'll kick me out. I-I'm appeasing an angry god, I th-thought you would understand."

He lets out a nervous laugh and covers his mouth, the tears he was trying to fight running down his cheeks.

“Techno, are you okay?” Ranboo says, glancing up from the frozen chest. He’s on his knees next to it, with Tommy helping him to put things away

He can’t cry. He can’t start crying now. It’s going to be an absolute disaster if he cries. He *can’t* cry anymore. He cried plenty in the shower and in the hours after it happened.

“I’m fine,” he says as carefully as he can. “Just- I’m fine.” He pets his fingers along the artifact in his hands, holding it almost protectively.

(It’s a Nether artifact. There’s... not a lot of those in the overworld, beyond weaponry and armor. It’s harder to find the artistic things from the dimension; they’re often just *lost*, destroyed in some raid or another.

He has a few things, mostly piglin-made jewelry and a few combs, but they’re rare and it makes an odd ache build in his chest.)

Phil comes in the door, carrying his coat over one arm and a bag over his shoulder. There’s blood on his shirt and pants, probably from gutting and cleaning the fish. He’s smiling, his attention distracted by the younger two.

Techno quickly wipes his eyes on his sleeve and takes a deep breath.

He’s fine. He’s not going to cry.

He’s fine.

Chapter End Notes

summary:

techno is home alone (everyone else is off doing their own thing; niki is in the village, phil and the boys are fishing, and wilbur is in l'manberg) and reflecting on what's going on around him.

wilbur is being an even bigger bastard about the resurrection and starting arguments.

there are implications of him getting somewhat violent. there are Tensions.

dream shows up with all his pushy fake-politeness and makes a threat towards his family, while also saying he could make a Deal with him to protect them. of course, techno takes the offer of a deal.

the deal happens to be essentially trading sex for their safety. techno doesn't want to do it (for a host of reasons) but he doesn't want to risk his family, so he goes along with it.

it's predictably terrible. he's left fairly injured (notable injuries include being choked and a bite mark on his shoulder, along with milder injuries in unsavory places) and incredibly traumatized, both from the act itself and from old memories getting dragged up (he's been assaulted twice in his past and that made it a lot worse) and from generally just dealing with the implications of what he's doing.

but dream leaves and techno is able to get cleaned up. he decides he's Not going to talk about it with his family because he doesn't want to think about it anymore.

-

the second part of the chapter is a real!dream pov, oh dear he's gotten home after what happened with techno, and is Not handling it well. the demon is being an asshole and taunting him about it, but importantly, it makes a threat towards the kids and dream shuts it down with "if you hurt them i will fucking exorcise you"

there's also a discussion, related to this, about the demon having abused and assaulted ranboo when he was about 11-12.

dream gets cleaned up after what happened. the demon continues to taunt him, bringing up george and his brothers, but dream tries to work through it, until it brings up having Done Something to ranboo recently. dream asks what it means, and it tells him that it assaulted ranboo after he was stabbed and blinded.

dream begins to break down and is like "oh my god leave people alone. stop doing sex crimes." the demon says it won't because it's a Demon and Demons Do Terrible Things. but dream persists and says he'll make a deal with it to keep everyone safe.

so, the demon tells him it'll stop assaulting people for it's own fun if he kills techno, on his own, without it guiding him. and he agrees that he will.

the final part of the chapter goes back to techno pov;

techno is pretending to be fine after what happened, hanging out in the house.

phil and the boys get home. tommy comes inside with something he found for techno while fishing; a nether artifact, being a small gold disc engraved with an image of an intact bastion and some words in piglin. techno gets very emotional since he's Fragile, and is trying his best not to cry.

tommy and ranboo are talking and joking, and something they say makes techno actually cry. ranboo asks if he's alright and he lies and says he is.

he's trying his best to be okay.

requisite Dove Update: i finally got a consultation for surgery set up, pog! it's not until november which is pretty uncool, but that means i will have a lot of rest days to write nonsense.

my pain is pretty bad rn but posting chapters and getting feedback makes me very happy!! even if i don't reply to comments (i feel repetitive and awkward lol) i read All Of Them all the time and they fill me with joy.

walked about twenty blocks talking about good bars and better towns than this one

Chapter Notes

a new chapter!!! fuck yeah dude.

bastard wilbur arc continues. he sucks... for now! this one is a bit shorter and a tiny bit lighter than the last two... which is a good thing lmao. single pov chapter again.....
back 2 my roots

warnings for generally shitty behavior, victim blaming (pretty mild but also upsetting), references to underage and adult alcoholism, various kinds of past abuse that's kind of bleeding into the present, lots of discussions about smoking, and references to sex and sexual assault (which is seen as just sex by wilbur), and a very unreliable narrator (wilbur is wrong about a lot of things and is convinced his view on things is correct. bitch)

title from i love you like an alcoholic by the taxpayers!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Wilbur shakes his wings out after he lands. The cream feathers settle around the odd golden ones with a sound that's subtly different from what they would make before.

Subtle differences are more upsetting, he's learning.

He folds his wings against his back and turns towards the street.

L'manberg looks... nice. Everything is relatively clean and the buildings are all in good repair and in the bright spring sunshine there are plants growing in windowboxes and the like.

But he's able to pin what's wrong in less than a minute.

It's too quiet.

There's no one around. Not even the shades of people who filled the void of a population...

It's just *silence*.

He shivers. It's a more subtle wrongness than what he noticed when he destroyed this place, but again, it's more disturbing. The whole place feels haunted, and perhaps it is.

He walks through the silent streets.

He hasn't run into anyone. While he was flying, he saw people below him a few times, but he was too high up to make out details, and hopefully too high up for them to see clearly as well.

He tucks his hands into his pockets.

This coat isn't his old one, because Tommy has taken it over. No, it's one that Techno gave him, shortly after he was resurrected.

It was a pragmatic gesture, not a kind one. It's far too cold for him in their frozen arctic home without a coat, especially as an avian.

"I don't want to have to deal with you freezin' to death out here."

The coat is nice, though. Soft leather lined with even softer fleece. It's pleasantly heavy on his back. Plus, it's perfectly tailored for his wings.

It's weird to think that Technoblade, a man who has murdered people for sport, is so good with his hands that he can sew things like this.

God, this place is a ghost town.

Wilbur pauses in the middle of the plaza and looks around. It's dead quiet; his footsteps seem to echo away forever.

Instinctively, he checks his pockets for a pack of cigarettes and a lighter, but of course he doesn't have any. He supposes there's no one he could get them from here, and he smoked through what he had back in Pogtopia.

But god, he could smoke right now.

He should have quit a long time ago. And technically he did, when he was taking care of Tommy after Techno left, and then when Fundy was small. But... well, he gave into addiction again.

He has a lot of problems with that. With giving into things in general, really.

Giving into pressure. Giving into the cracks in his own already-neurotic mind. Giving into that destructive *impulse* he's nursed since he was a child setting sticks on fire in the backyard.

He doesn't dream when he sleeps, but in the space between waking and sleeping, when his imagination wanders, he can still hear the explosion.

He exhales deeply and stretches his arms over his head, before walking along.

There aren't any people around. It's endlessly quiet, nothing but his footsteps and his breathing and the occasional bit of birdsong and wind--

Wait.

Other footsteps. With no particular urgency, but coming towards him.

He slides his hands into his pockets and turns towards the sounds.

There's a voice, too. A familiar one.

Two voices, actually, one much quieter.

"-need you to be quiet, I took a walk so I could get my headache to go *away*."

"I promise you, it won't go away."

A disdainful laugh.

And for some reason, that makes it clear who it is.

It's Tubbo, and he's more taken aback by the way he looks than he expected, when he steps around a corner.

He looks *terrible*. He's remarkably pale in the spring sunshine, and even from feet away, he can see the bloodshot state of his eyes and the dark circles below them. He's dressed cleanly, but something about his slightly oversized sweater and jeans seems inappropriate in the warm air. Wilbur's chest feels tight at the sight.

He has a companion with him. A tall, greyed figure with slightly transparent skin and a cigarette in one hand and a pair of shining, curled horns-

God, this is fucking *unfair*.

It takes Tubbo and Schlatt a few moments to notice him, but there's no time for him to run off.

So, instead, he stands in place, hands hidden to mask their shaking, and allows the confrontation.

Tubbo sees him first. His bloodshot eyes widen, and he stops so suddenly his feet tangle and he nearly trips.

Schlatt doesn't respond with the same kind of surprise. His expression is oddly cool, even a bit amused.

"So you're alive again, songbird," he says calmly, raising a brow as he lifts his cigarette to his mouth. "That's a shame, we were all a lot happier with you gone."

Wilbur doesn't even need to think before the reply comes to his lips. "You'd think dying would make you a bit more pleasant to be around, Schlatt."

"Oh, yeah, you'd think so," he shrugs. "But nah, I'm still the same. Why tamper with what works?" His eyes are pure white, no irises or pupils, but he can feel them dart over his face,

his body, his clothes. “You look better, though. A little less shabby and... *featherless* . The gold is a nice touch.”

He tries hard not to let the stab of rage show on his face. His hands are in fists now, pressed against the inside of his pockets.

Instead, he puts on a smile and looks to the teenager at his side. “Hey, Tubbo. How are you doing?”

Tubbo’s expression is less alarmed now, and far more guarded. His brows are furrowed and his arms are crossed over his chest, as his eyes lift to meet his own. “Fine,” he replies neutrally. His mismatched eyes betray no particular emotion, either. “I thought you were dead. We *buried* you.”

Wilbur feels his face twitch, but he’s good with keeping up a fake smile. “I was. It’s... it’s a bit of a story, but I got resurrected.”

“Clearly,” he says, still very guarded. Anyone else would take it as disinterest, but he’s known the kid since he was two. “So you got rid of everything, wrecked us all emotionally, and decided to come walking back in when death stopped being entertaining?”

Despite the emotion those words would carry, his voice is flat, and not a hint of hurt or rage or grief show on his tired face.

He looks older. And- well, he is, of course. He’s seventeen now. But still, he looks older than even that.

“I didn’t want to be resurrected,” he carefully corrects. “I was really planning to stay dead.”

Tubbo raises an eyebrow. “Then why are you back?”

He opens his mouth to reply, before considering it.

Sure, he couldn’t care less if Techno (and maybe even Phil) got in trouble for whatever immoral magic they did. Because at this point, he’s convinced it’s only due to Techno’s own arrogance that he’s avoided detection.

But...

Tommy is there, with them. And Niki is, as well. Hell, he doesn’t even *care* about Ranboo, but the kid has clearly gotten himself on Tubbo’s bad side and he doesn’t want to throw him to the wolves, metaphorically speaking. And if he *knew*...

So he shrugs. “It’s how things worked out, I guess. I ended up coming back.”

Schlatt laughs, in that distinctly unpleasant way he’s always been able to pull off flawlessly. “God, you’re still a piece of work, aren’t you? You left everything in shambles because you couldn’t have what you wanted, and you act like coming back *wasn’t* part of your plan. Forgive me if I don’t believe it.”

Wilbur can't stop himself from bristling a little. The angry shiver that goes through him makes all his feathers rustle up against his back and his neck and behind his ears. "Careful, Schlatt, saying things like that might make someone think you admire my planning."

"Oh, I do," he says, voice dripping sarcasm like a physical thing. Ash that melts into nothingness tumbles from the end of his cigarette. "The whole 'blowing up your country because things went downhill' was a *fantastic* show of your intellect, Wil. I've always found your wit absolutely impressive."

"Please don't do this," Tubbo says with exhaustion. "At least not in front of me."

"You died before that even happened," he says bitterly. "How do you know?"

"I saw it as a ghost, obviously. And I've heard plenty about it." Schlatt raises a brow. "Did you know they buried you right next to me? I thought it was a pretty sweet gesture."

Tubbo groans and buries his face in his hands.

Wilbur gives one short, mean laugh and takes his angrily-fisted hands out of his pockets. God, he wouldn't have tried to come back if he knew this was what he'd come back to. "Why?" He's glaring at the ghost, but he directs the question to Tubbo.

"For practicality's sake," he says, muffled by his hands. "It's easier to just put graves near eachother."

"I'd rather you have cast me into fire, in all honesty." He tries to untense his hands, but he can't. There are near-permanent sore spots on his palms from doing this very thing around his family. "You know better than most how I'd feel about that."

He drops his hands. His face is slightly flushed and his carefully guarded expression has cracked slightly.

"I'm sorry for not considering your feelings," he says shortly. "I had a lot more on my mind. Like the responsibility of being a president that had been *dropped* on my shoulders, and helping the traumatized wrecks of a brother and son you left behind not entirely break down."

He makes the mistake of letting his voice crack.

Wilbur has always been irritated by weakness. If he picked at the surface of that irritation, it would come from his own fear of being perceived as such.

He curls his fists tighter and takes a step forward, narrowing the already scant distance between himself and Tubbo. To his credit, the kid doesn't flinch— he instead audibly grits his teeth and meets his eyes steadily.

"I have done so *much* for you," he says evenly. "You seemed fine with the responsibility. And it was never your job to take care of Tommy or Fundy, you're just martyring yourself. You were always good at that." He puts his hands back into his pockets. "Just look at yourself. What happened to you?"

Tubbo's jaw tightens and he refuses to break eye contact. There's a bruise along his jaw. "That's none of your business," he says shortly. "Get out of here, you're not welcome."

Wilbur can't help but laugh, abrupt and painful for both of them and, most importantly, cruel. "I'm not welcome? I built this place, it wouldn't exist without me. I can stay however long I like."

His eye twitches, and the spasm travels to the scar over his nose. He remembers those firework burns, but he doesn't remember how he himself reacted to them. The holes in his memories seem too numerous.

"I mean, you can be kicked out," Schlatt observes with no small amount of humor. "I found that one out, didn't I?"

"Shut up," Tubbo mutters to him. "I don't want to have to physically drive you out, Wilbur. Just *go*."

He's able to untense his fists enough for his fingers to ache. "You're going to *physically drive me out*?" He asks, somewhat incredulous. "You wouldn't do that, I know you wouldn't."

Of course he wouldn't. Tubbo isn't a coward, but he doesn't like violence. He's always avoided it when he can, and after being executed, he's even more squeamish. He's a peaceful kid.

Something metal and shiny flashes in Tubbo's right hand as he pulls it from his pocket.

It's a knife. A nice one, really, sharpened and polished netherite with a leather-wrapped handle.

He raises a brow, somewhat amused.

Schlatt laughs at his side and steps up in the air, turning to float on his back behind him. He doesn't say anything, but he has a delighted expression on his face as he watches.

Wilbur flexes his fingers and glances at the knife, then at Tubbo's coolly annoyed face. "Are you going to stab me?"

"I'd rather not," he says, incredibly flat. "But I'm completely able to."

"He is," Schlatt comments. "Haven't you heard, since you came back? He's really grown up and started to assert himself. I'm proud of him."

He remembers what Techno mentioned, about Ranboo being blinded. About Tubbo not handling his responsibility well. About him exiling Tommy, for good.

About an *execution*.

A trickle of awareness manages to penetrate through the layers of his annoyance and arrogance; *this boy won't hesitate to stab me*.

His next exhale comes out a little shaky. He's surprised by how scared the idea makes him.

Tubbo used to be a *very* sweet kid. He was quiet but not overly shy, incredibly polite, and kind to a fault. He was the kind of kid who gently took insects out of the house instead of squishing them, got far too amused by simple jokes, and weaved everyone flower crowns every few days.

But looking at him now, with bloodshot eyes and a knife in hand and his lower lip cracked and bleeding and his face subtly puffy from alcohol, he realizes he's crashed hard down the same path his father took.

(Schlatt was a nice guy, too. A long time ago.

A *very* long time ago.)

Maybe even worse.

"Get out," Tubbo repeats, back to an impressive calm. "Please, Wilbur. Just *leave*."

Wilbur swallows thickly and puts his hands in his pockets again. He's trembling. "Fine," he spits, too intensely.

He's too emotional, suddenly.

("You-- oh my god, is that a kid?" Wilbur's voice cracked as he stared at the small, sleeping figure in his friend's arms.

Schlatt shifted his arms around the child. "Yeah," he said, voice cracking. "I found him laying in a *box*, Wil--"

"Shit," he said, grabbing a blanket off the wooden rocking chair and stepping forward to wrap it around the child in his arms. "Is he okay? He's alive, right?"

He nods, shifting to allow him to wrap the baby in the soft blanket. "He's alive," he confirmed, "he was awake earlier, breathing fine, everything." He strokes his hair, soft and brown and--

Wilbur blinks.

The kid has tiny, *tiny* horns.

"Is he *yours*?"

"No!")

As carefully and calmly as he can, he turns from the two of them, and walks away.

He was going to keep revisiting the place, but it's not worth it.

He keeps walking until he feels safe to fly. He takes to the sky and his wings catch the air as he climbs.

There's a *pit* in his stomach, though it's quickly filling with annoyance and rage.

Fucking *Tubbo* . The kid has obviously let himself spiral far beyond what he's capable of handling. He's never been good with heavy emotions. And he's clearly been drinking a lot; Wilbur didn't live with several alcoholics and indulge in the pastime himself to not notice the signs.

And he's so young, yet so full of arrogance and self importance. What has he done to deserve that pride? He was a spy, but then he got caught and executed for it. Now he's running a ghost town with an *actual* ghost at his side.

The image of a ghostly Schlatt makes him bare his teeth in the air. Of course he didn't just pass on to whatever hell like he fucking deserves. Of course he's still around, causing problems. Of course.

Wilbur should have expected it to go badly. More rage boils in his stomach as he thinks about Tubbo threatening him with a *knife* .

Everyone seems to be treating him horribly based on such ridiculous reasons. He didn't ask to be brought back, and he sure as hell didn't ask for his family to be shutting him out emotionally and somewhat physically.

(Niki and Techno won't let him touch them. Tommy gets very tense when he gets too close. Phil still offers him affection, which he tries not to pull away from, but it's rarer. Ranboo, the only complete stranger around, seems terrified of him.)

Sure, he took drastic measures before he died. But they were so clearly justified.

He was right. His breakdown in the button room was driven not only by the cracks spreading throughout his mind-- cracks that began *many* years before-- but by the realization that his plan was the *only* thing he could do. He couldn't let things go on. He had to be the one to destroy everything.

Do they think it was easy for him to decide?

It wasn't. So many of those sleepless nights were spent trying to figure out another way, and many more were spent trying to come to grips with what he had to do.

It wasn't an easy choice. Far from it. But it's what he needed to do.

And now he's being shamed for it, after being dragged back to life against his own will. After they pushed his little brother into sacrificing his soul for him.

They keep telling him it was Tommy's decision, but that's clearly bullshit. Tommy is still a teenager-- he's in no way old enough or smart enough to make that kind of decision on his own. He knows the kid he raised, and that kid is in no way mature enough to decide to damage his own mortality in another person's honor.

They pushed him. And maybe their intentions were pure, or as pure as Techno's intentions specifically can get; he still shouldn't have done it, ever.

The air is still warm when Wilbur dives down to rest atop the thick branches of a dark oak. He dips below the canopy carefully, and finds a forked branch to sit down on. The area below the leaves is cast in deep shadow. In fact, he can hear the rattle of bones, indicating some undead creature lurking nearby.

He can't find it in himself to be too worried, though. Monsters don't tend to bother him anymore. He wandered around outside the other night, well after dark, and the only thing that took interest in him was a spider. And only for a minute, too. It screeched at him, leapt in his direction once, and then took off, presumably for better prey.

Maybe they can all tell his re-existence is a sin against nature.

He leans back on the tree trunk and lets his eyes close. His legs dangle off the branch. It's nice out here. Quiet, save for the murmur of creatures around him and the breeze through the leaves. He hates the snow, hates the cold; the warmth out here is at least a tiny bit less miserable. Everyone else seems to not mind it, which is unfortunate.

He should leave. He has no idea where he could go, but he could move somewhere else. Not back to L'manberg, unless he wants to start some sort of uprising. Which... his heart isn't really in the idea, this time.

He kicks his feet slowly underneath the branch. What's really stopping him from leaving? Not just the arctic, but the server entirely? He died already, there's nothing keeping him here.

His family is here, but he had resigned himself to never seeing them again when he died. It's better if he's gone, especially since his brothers are shutting him out and Phil won't look him in the eyes and he doesn't even know or really care where Fundy is at this point and he has no friends.

He hasn't cried since the day he was brought back, and it doesn't seem to be changing. But there is a mild discomfort in his mind about his family not seeming comfortable with him anymore.

There is an ache in his chest, unrelated to the sprawling scar.

He could leave. It wouldn't be *hard*. He could just walk out and leave whatever is left of this place to flourish or decay or both.

He could just leave. What's stopping him?

...Tommy is still here.

Tommy is one of the only things to draw real emotion from him anymore. If he knew for a fact that he was entirely safe, he could leave and disappear or maybe just kill himself again to get it over with. But he doesn't know that for sure.

How could he? Tommy attracts trouble like light attracts moths.

Dream showed up the other day.

Wilbur didn't see him, he was in the shower, but when he came into the living room, Tommy was sitting curled up against Niki's side on the couch. His face was pale and he was visibly trembling, even from across the room.

He hesitated near the bathroom door, unsettled. "What's going on?" He asked, eyes darting from the couch to the window, where Techno is lurking with a dark expression. "What happened?"

Niki paused in making soothing noises to Tommy, glancing over at him with a softer expression than her new normal. No one said anything for a few tense moments.

Tommy was staring at the floor, picking at his sleeve. "Dream was here," he said, almost haunted. "Nothing really happened, I-I'm fine."

Techno huffed and returned his eyes to the window, but for half a second, he met Wilbur's gaze.

It was the first time in many years they shared a moment of genuine concern. It makes sense that it was over Tommy.

He had pried, later on. Not with Tommy, because he went to his room and stayed there until dinner. Even then, he looked too upset to be bothered.

He felt like it was unwise, but he asked Techno. He made sure to pick a moment where he seemed calm, and that happened to be while he was brushing his hair in front of the fire.

Wilbur sat at his side quietly for a few long minutes. It's the closest they've ever been in... months. The last time they sat together like that, it was that quiet early morning when he braided his hair.

Techno crossed his legs on the rug in front of the fire. "What do you want?" he asked shortly, running his fingers through an untangled portion of his hair.

He fiddled with his sweater, inspecting the soft white knit. "Why was Tommy so scared, earlier?"

He gave a deep sigh and turned his eyes to the fire. "Dream basically tortured him while he was exiled," he said, a touch more kindly than before. "He's terrified of him, and Dream wants to get him back for some reason."

Wilbur frowned and glanced back at the closed door across the kitchen. "I..."

Something bit at the back of his mind. He knows something about this, about Dream tormenting Tommy for whatever reason. Why does he know? Is it from when he was a ghost? He remembers very little of that; he's managed to unlock a few memories, though it's mostly just a sense of oblivious happiness.

“It’s why he had to run away,” Techno added, brushing through the right side of his hair. It’s gotten so long, parts of it pool against the floor in a mess of pink waves. He’s managed to tame the curls, at least. “When he showed up out here, he was a wreck.” There was a meaningful pause. “I wasn’t exaggeratin’ when I said he nearly froze to death.” It was a bit *defensive*, the way he said it.

“I didn’t think you were,” he surprised himself by saying. “For all your faults, you’re not really a liar.”

In the light of the fire, his cheeks went red.

They didn’t talk much more, but it wasn’t... their worst night so far, at all. Techno was back to being quiet and standoffish in the morning, though.

So he can’t just leave Tommy here. Not while Dream is wandering around, hurting him and trying to pry him away from people who can defend him.

Wilbur never liked Dream very much. He’s not sure what tipped him off about him, in the beginning, but in the end, it was definitely whatever the fuck he did to Techno all those years ago. Even now, he can’t deny how terrifying that was, and that’s after years of building a grudge against his brother.

So much blood. Torn clothing. Tangled hair. Four months of pure silence.

He shudders at the memory, even so far away from it. He isn’t as broken up about it now, he’s mature enough to see it more objectively, but he’s not going to lie and say it wasn’t pretty bad.

He stands up on the branch and returns to the sky.

-

Returning back to the cabin feels a bit like giving up, for some reason. The sky is blindingly clear and blue, the sunlight is white and without warmth, and everything looks so goddamn normal and clean.

Wilbur lands on a flat expanse of snow and bitterly kicks at it. It’s all so clean and pure below his feet and he hates it. He hates the snow, he hates how the cold wraps around him like a horrible, antithetical blanket.

He may not be able to be happy, or really sad, or anything like that, but he’s plenty capable of being angry. It’s a comforting emotion, after how empty he felt before he died. At least he can be angry.

He walks towards the house. It’s cold and still outside, like it’s going to storm, but there’s barely a cloud in the sky.

Tommy is on the porch, sitting carefully balanced on the railing. He’s watching the trees with narrowed eyes, his back tense.

“He’s terrified of him.”

“Hey,” Wilbur says as he rises the stairs, hands in his pockets.

Tommy jolts, nearly losing his balance. He grips onto the stone wall with both hands and turns to him with clear fear in his eyes, but only for a moment. “Oh, hi. You’re back,” he acknowledges, and his voice is clear of his returned stutter for the moment.

“I am,” he agrees, glancing at the woods casually. Nothing there, just trees. “How was the fishing trip?”

“Pretty okay, I still th-think it’s boring as hell.” He shifts himself atop the railing, wings extending to help his balance. “Uh, wh-where were you?”

He observes his little brother for a long moment. He looks small underneath his soft wool cloak and the fluffed out feathers of his wings. His hair is down and falls in blonde waves around his face, the white streak seeming especially stark. He looks so young.

He shrugs. “I mostly just wandered.” He doesn’t think he needs to know why he went out. It might just upset him, and he doesn’t want to, for now. “Why are you watching the forest?”

Tommy shifts again and fidgets with his cloak. His eyes dart towards the trees again. “Oh. Well...” he ducks his head. “Techno said th-that Dream, uh, showed up here earlier. So I’m nervous...”

He looks up through his bangs at Wilbur, meeting his eyes for the first time in a *long* time. His eyes look too dull, darker and greyer than before. “Do you- uh, I haven’t really talked a-about that with you.”

Wilbur suddenly craves a cigarette again, at the sight of his brother’s dulled eyes. “No, you haven’t. I’ve heard about what happened with you two, though.” He runs his hands over his coat. They’re kind of shaking. “He was here? While Techno was alone?”

He nods, reaching up to tug at his hair. “That’s what he said,” he says quietly. “He didn’t t-tell us what happened, not really, but-- uh...”

His hand drops from his hair, to brush over his neck. He’s wearing a necklace with a golden charm on it, decorated with an emerald, and he fiddles with it. “He has b-bruises on his neck.”

He needs a smoke, fuck. He needs to find some cigarettes, somehow.

If Dream was here, and Techno now has bruises on his neck...

Well, he can make some conclusions. He doesn’t like them, but they’re pretty obvious to him.

“He’s fine,” he says dismissively. Tommy blinks at him and pulls on his necklace chain. “I’m gonna head inside. Be careful.” There’s not the appropriate level of care in the words, like he would have put into it years ago.

He goes inside. The house is quiet, with only low noises. Phil is at the table, drawing something on the page of a notebook. Niki is sitting next to the fire, preening her wings, expression calm. She's in a new grey and white striped dress, over blue stockings and the knee-high boots that have become her regular.

Techno is sitting on the floor in front of the armchair, letting Ranboo, who's curled up on the seat, braid his hair. They both seem fairly content.

Wilbur slides his hands into his pockets again and glances over at Techno, morbidly curious about his own conclusions.

Yeah, he has bruises on his neck. A lot, actually, dark and intense against his pale skin and his white shirt, and on his wrists too.

I can't believe my brother is getting more than me right now.

He shudders a bit at the idea. That's unfair. Techno is endlessly awkward and socially inept, but he obviously had sex with Dream while he was there.

"Your hair is so fluffy," Ranboo says cheerfully, braiding Techno's hair as carefully as he can.

Techno huffs and grins in a somewhat uncomfortable way. "Thanks, I'm pretty proud of it." He tilts his head back a bit, revealing more of his neck and letting the collar of his shirt fall down.

Yeah, lots of bruises. All over him.

He feels disgusted and envy bites at his throat. It's petty of him, and he's aware of it, but he's unhappy about it regardless.

Sex would probably make him feel something... but he doesn't really have options, right now. Which just makes it more irritating that Techno was able to manage it. He knows he lives out in the frozen wastes to avoid *people*.

But it still happened, clearly.

Wilbur digs his fingers into his incredibly sore palms.

Techno glances over at him, raising a brow. "You're back. How was your trip?"

He can taste the disapproval and arrogance in it. It makes the rage he's felt ever since he left L'manberg burn at the back of his throat like bile, like whiskey.

He can't resist the satisfaction of being mean.

"Stop acting like you care," he snaps, turning to his younger brother with his teeth bared and his hands leaving his pockets. "Be quiet and hold your fucking tongue for once."

Techno's eyes widen. He has a bruise on his jaw, too, though that looks less like a hickey and more like he was actually hurt.

"I-" He opens his mouth to speak, but only one sound comes out. His eyebrows furrow.

"What was that for?" Niki asks from her place on the fire. She's turned to them, her face set in disapproval.

Wilbur should stop, but he doesn't want to.

"Because he's pretending that he cares where I've been," he spits. "Or that he cares if I come back."

Techno frowns. "I-I do *care*," he says, sounding oddly weak. "I was just askin' because you haven't been back there since you were--"

"I told you to shut up, didn't I?" He steps forward, closer to him, tightening his fists at his sides. His wings rustle and flick out from his back, raising to make him seem bigger.

Techno doesn't move, staring up at him from the floor with wide, scared-animal eyes. Ranboo is equally stiff in the chair behind him, making scared noises.

"You can't say that you care after how you've treated me," Wilbur gestures at himself, the golden streaks in his hair. "After you ripped me back to life, against everything I wanted when I died."

*Fight back. Argue back at me, Technoblade. Come on, I want to fight with you. Make me feel something for once. I want to **feel**.*

Techno's eyes well with tears and he meekly turns his gaze to his lap.

His shoulders jolt as he lets out a quiet sob.

Wilbur *hates* weakness. He always has. Especially from someone like Technoblade; it reads as pitifully *false*, preformative in the worst way.

He takes one step closer, but he's stopped from further escalation by a familiar, cold hand grabbing his upper arm. When he turns, Phil is looking up at him with pure disappointment in his eyes.

"All of that was entirely uncalled for," he says in a cool tone. "Let's go on a walk, so you can maybe clear your head and get some sense." It's not at all a suggestion.

Wilbur looks over at Techno. He's crying softly, shoulders shaking. Ranboo and Niki have both approached him to offer comfort.

He doesn't deserve comfort. It's an act-- Techno's whole new attitude is an *act*.

He recently killed a man with a pickaxe just for being near his house. He hasn't changed; he's still bloodthirsty and horrible and as cold and uncaring as the arctic winds. It's an act for

sympathy, like when a child falls and milks a tiny scrape on the knee for all the comfort and treats and affection that they can. (Techno did that a lot as a child. He got hurt nearly daily playing outside. Phil spoiled him about it, unsurprisingly.)

He knows Techno far too well to think he's harmless and soft, now.

He jerks his arm away from Phil and turns to the door on his own. "I'll walk alone."

"Wil-" His father's voice is full of reproach and disapproval. It makes his blood even hotter.

"I *said* I'll walk alone." His voice betrays his anger, and he glances back at all of them.

Phil is looking at him with both disappointment and helplessness in his eyes, mouth parted as if to speak but no words coming forward.

Techno is still crying in the arms of his friends-- both younger than him, just another sign of how uncaring he is. Niki strokes his hair and Ranboo hugs him close, long arms wrapped around his trembling form.

The bruises on his throat are still prominent and stark, like lights in the dark of night. He acts like he's changed and isn't still a horrible person, but he slept with Dream, who tortured their younger brother. With seemingly little regret, too.

Wilbur storms out the door, past Tommy-- who startles again and nearly falls over the edge of the porch railing, and the idea that he could fall right into the deep snowdrifts doesn't even bother him-- and across the white lawn.

He doesn't know where he's going.

But god, he needs a cigarette.

Chapter End Notes

dove update (dovedate, if you will): it's about a month until my surgery consultation, pogchamp. my pain is very bad lately and i sleep a lot, but i'm still writing, so who's the winner here?

(hint it's me and not the bastard cyst on my spinal cord)

also i don't know how i feel about this chapter? i think it's good but also i think it's very bad. conflicting reports. but i hope all of you like it <33 go drink some water and enjoy your day. pet a cat for me. or a dog or a lizard or a bird. whatever animal you can catch

lately i've been crying like a tall child

Chapter Notes

a new chapter..... finally. the breaks are annoying i know my friends.

i am tired as hell and my pain is getting fuckin. worse and getting help is hard. but luckily for all of us my desire to write never ends because i'm too sexy to be stopped.

anyway. ranboo chapter!! mr beloved!! this one covers a lot. its about enderwalk stuff babey.

warnings for past abuse, psychological stuff, minor self-harm, references to past sexual assault, and general sad times :-)

title from first love/late spring by mitski! big snow au ranboo energy.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Ranboo pats the soaked cloth on his tear-burnt cheeks, wincing as the healing potion stings and then soothes the low ache of the wounds.

He can't stop crying, no matter how hard he tries.

He finally found out what his nightmares mean. What they've been telling him. They weren't random nightmares; they were his brain informing him of what happens when he sleepwalks. Is it even sleepwalking? He seems too aware...

He really has been talking to Dream. Openly, unashamedly, telling him all kinds of incriminating things. He had hoped so hard that what he thought was happening really wasn't, but of course it *was*. He's been betraying the only people who trust him, who even *care* about him.

He talked to him about a lot of things. Things he shouldn't share. Things Dream probably *knew* already, but it makes him feel unbelievably guilty to have given him that information firsthand.

If he could stop crying, he'd be in a lot clearer of a mindset. But he can't, because all he can think about is how much this is going to ruin things. If they find out...

"No," he whispers to himself, treating the burns gently despite the fact that they're just going to get irritated again.

He can't tell them, and they can't find out. They're going to hate him. He's sure he's already messed up in some way (he's just not sure how) but this will be infinitely worse. He'll get

kicked out. And he has nowhere to go, at all. L'manberg isn't an option, and there's no one around who he trusts enough, outside of his family.

Family.

He has a family now, and he messed it all up.

What's wrong with him? Why did he even *do* that? Was it Dream's fault? Did he somehow control him? He doesn't know and it's driving him mad.

He snuffles and dries his face, of tears and blood and potion. No, he can't do this.

It's the middle of the night. Everyone is asleep in bed.

He's in the basement.

It's bitterly cold, his toes are freezing and his hands are trembling for a reason unrelated to his tears. He's wrapped in a blanket, but it's not enough.

He deserves it. Every ounce of suffering.

He wraps his arms around his knees, and entangles a hand at the back of his hair. His breathing is shallow and he's making ender noises to himself, quietly.

Should he tell them? He doesn't want to. They'll be so angry and betrayed.

Techno will go cold and distant and dangerous again, and he sure as hell won't let Ranboo braid his hair anymore. And getting to do that was an important threshold of trust, he knows; Techno is particularly attached to and protective of his hair.

Tommy will be so hurt, and he'll cry, and he'll never hold him again. His soft wings will never again wrap around him like blankets when they hug. He'll never get to hear the younger boy ramble about something at night, laying in bed at his side.

Niki will be so disgusted, and she'll never smile at him in that sweet, knowing way that makes him feel like all his problems are gone. She'll regard him with suspicion and mistrust and fear, her hand always hovering near her knife or her axe when he's too close.

And Phil, who's kind and patient and caring, who has offered him the same love and care he shows his sons, would—

He vwoops anxiously and covers his mouth to muffle a sob. Oh, stars.

Phil would *hit him*. He's sure of it. He's sure the man would see him as a threat to his children and hit him and kick him out into the awful snow.

Why wouldn't he? Ranboo *is* dangerous, obviously. He blacks out and does the End only knows what in his sleep.

He curls up tighter and whimpers. He doesn't want Phil to hit him. He wants to be *good*, he wants to be so good they don't *have* to hurt him.

He was *doing* good. He does his chores, even stuff he hates like folding towels (they have such a bad texture) and he stays quiet and he agrees with everything and he never complains, ever.

And now he fucked up completely. All that trust is going to melt into nothing.

He yanks at his hair, breathing so shallowly that his chest aches. He's rocking back and forth slightly, making a steady stream of ender noises and hiccups as he cries and gasps.

He doesn't want to be kicked out. Where would he go? He's too scared to speak to anyone, or ask for assistance. For all he knows, Tubbo has spread the lie that he's a traitor and everyone believes it. No one would take him in. He's a liability, a useless risk. They'd hate him.

He's trapped. So, so trapped. Nowhere to run. Nowhere to hide. He'll just have to take what the stars offer him. And the stars are not kind to him.

He chokes on his cries and buries his face in his knees. His tail wraps tightly around his legs.

He's begun to mumble prayers in ender, begging for salvation.

But the End can't hear him, and wouldn't care anyway. The only thing it could offer him is the cool embrace of the crushing void.

(Ranboo almost fell into the void, once.

It sticks out starkly as one of his strongest childhood memories, from a period in his life that's oddly full of them. Maybe he just remembers more because that was from before whatever caused his memory issues. He's still not sure.

He was very small, maybe only three or four. His parent had set him down for a moment, probably to pick chorus fruit, which is a two-handed job.

He had taken advantage of the freedom, toddling away happily. He was babbling in ender, he can remember it was about one of his siblings, though the exact content of his words are forgotten.

They were very close to the edge, and he hadn't yet learned to fear the purple-black void. He was just curious about what was around them. It looked interesting and beautiful, glimmering, floating with purple particles and odd fog.

He wandered close to the edge of the island, where the endstone sloped down into the abyss. He didn't pay attention to the downward angle.

He almost walked right into it. His parent had screamed and ran to grab him, clawed, long hands wrapping around his thin child body and bringing him in close for a hug.

They held him close for a long time, obviously disturbed, and it made him upset. He was old enough to know to apologize when he did something wrong, so he patted their shoulders and arms and mumbled that he was sorry.

They had told him that the void was dangerous and that he should never wander so close to the edge.

For some reason, it's all he can think about.)

(The similarity between the void and Dream isn't too hard to see.)

He rocks harder, the back of his head hitting the wall, barely protected by his hand in his hair.

Dream looked delighted, when he was talking to him the last time. He had his mask off, and his handsome face was set in a cruel smile, even stranger than the one on the mask.

Dream almost looks friendly. If it wasn't for how his smile doesn't reach his eyes, despite its toothiness.

"Thank you for catching me up, doll," he had said, bouncing on his toes. "You're so useful."

And he had kissed his cheek, before walking off.

Ranboo kind of wants to rip his cheek open in an attempt to scratch away where the man *kissed* him.

He didn't want to do this. Maybe they would believe him, if he told them that?

He doesn't know. Would they even let him explain? They might just react with violence.

He hugs his legs tighter. He's so tense he aches all over, and his cheeks hurt.

He should go back to bed. It's around dawn now if he's guessing right, and Techno tends to wake up early.

He nervously gets up to his feet, legs shaking. He wants to crawl into bed with Tommy, but he doesn't feel like he deserves it.

He climbs up into the living area, rubbing his cheeks with the potion-soaked cloth. Wilbur is deeply asleep, sprawled out on his side in bed, snoring.

Being close to him, he feels even more uncomfortable than before.

He's scared of him, point blank. He attacked Techno verbally just for asking if he was alright, he makes Tommy anxious, and he's argued with all of them. His thoughts and emotions are scary things, angry things. Lots of breaking glass and anger and a craving for cigarettes and misery.

More frightening, though, are the times he can't feel *anything* from the man. There's no wall blocking him, like with Dream; the emotions just aren't *there* .

He tiptoes to his bedroom again, avoiding the wooden floorboards that creak the most, and opens the door quietly. He slips in and gently closes it.

Tommy is laying in bed, making little birdlike noises, sleeping with a pillow in his arms.

Ranboo creeps to his bed, and folds himself back under the blankets. He grabs his enderman plush and draws it up to his chest, hugging it so tightly he can almost hear its seams protesting.

He doesn't want to sleep, because he's terrified that could happen again. The trancelike state that he's been assuming was just *sleepwalking*.

But now he can recall things from the last few times. Being somewhere far from here, wandering along in the shadow of a black wall. Walking next to Dream, in an empty field, hearing the sound of many monsters around them. Sitting cross-legged at Dream's feet as the man sharpens his axe next to a flickering fire.

He has no idea how he got to those places, though he supposes he could have teleported, which probably led to how little he remembers about the events that took place there.

But they *had* to be some level of bad; he was with Dream, and nothing Dream would be earnestly doing could at all be good.

What could Dream need him for? He's nothing special. He's very unspectacular and he doesn't usually do anything interesting, and when he does, it's always bad. He gets himself into trouble.

Though... maybe that would be a good thing for someone like Dream. Maybe a troublesome, stupid teenager would be useful.

He turns onto his back and looks up at the ceiling. The sun is indeed rising, so he should sleep, at least a little.

But he doesn't want to. What if it happens again? What if he wanders out and does something with Dream again? He doesn't want to do that, the shame and guilt would kill him.

He hugs himself tightly underneath his blankets, holding his enderman closer and pushing his face against its soft plush head.

He's tired, but he's too scared.

-

Ranboo wakes up, curled up underneath his blankets, drooling onto his pillow.

It takes him a few moments to realize he *failed* .

Panic fills him like freezing water (stinging and all) and he immediately jolts up into a sitting position, looking around to see if he's with Dream again. Where is he? Near that ominous black wall again, or alone with him somewhere else?

Tommy is sitting across from him on the edge of his own bed, brushing his hair. The fluffy blonde waves flutter down to his shoulders. "Good morning," he says, frowning a little, brows furrowed. "Are you okay?"

Ranboo looks around the room once more, startled now by the fact that he's safe in his room.

He's still at home. He doesn't seem to have left his bed either, he's still settled as comfortably as he was last night, he even still has his blankets tucked around his shoulders...

He blinks hard. He didn't-- he didn't go anywhere last night.

Thank the stars.

He's not surprised when his eyes well with relieved tears, running hot down his cheeks. He shouldn't cry, but he feels so relieved and thankful that nothing happened.

"Hey," Tommy says softly, coming across the space between their beds to sit next to him. He rests his hand on his back. "Are you okay? Did you have a nightmare?"

Ranboo dries his face on his sleeve and snuffles. "I-I..." his cheeks are all burnt and scabbed from crying so much last night, and it's itchy. "Y-yeah, I guess..." he trails off, unable and unwilling to explain.

His friend shuffles closer and slides his arm around his middle, moving slowly enough that he could stop him if he wanted to. He doesn't.

"I'm sorry," he says soothingly, bonking his head gently against his shoulder. It makes him giggle wetly. "D'you wanna talk about it?"

He hiccups, in the horrible way he does whenever he cries. He leans over to bury his face in Tommy's hair and hide his tears. "Not really," he mumbles. "I-I... it was just... scary. I'll be okay."

He wraps his other arm around him and squeezes him comfortingly, holding him close, intense, very present and real.

The guilt mingles with the warmth of the comfort and Ranboo pulls away. He wipes his face again, wincing when blood smears on his nightshirt's sleeve. "Thank you."

"Of course," Tommy says, withdrawing all contact respectfully.

He sighs and shuffles over to their nightstand. He opens the top drawer and digs through it. He has to treat his face, and then he has to try and eat breakfast, even though he kinda feels sick. He can't skip a meal, because everyone will ask why.

He hugs himself unhappily. He's so exhausted, even though he slept. Worry and guilt wrap around his organs and squeeze tightly like a snake.

He treats the wounds on his face, and stubbornly shoves away his panic and unhappiness.

-

"Are you alright?" Techno asks when he passes behind Ranboo at the table, touching his back briefly.

He pokes at his food uninterestedly. "I'm okay," he says as convincingly as he can. He doesn't want to discuss this.

His hand ruffles up his hair and he instinctively leans up into the touch, craving the affection. He stretches his legs out under the table and tilts his head into the hand on his head. He can hear him laugh as he scratches his scalp affectionately before pulling away.

Stars, you'd think he'd stop craving affection so much after a while. But being left without it after even a second makes his stomach turn.

He goes back to picking at his food. He hasn't been able to eat much; guilt takes away his appetite almost entirely. He mostly just eats when someone looks at him. The meal is nice—Techno and Phil are both *good* cooks— but everything feels and tastes like glue in his mouth.

He's acting suspicious, he knows. He's acting like something is wrong. But he can't help it—he's so anxious and guilty and upset that it's killing him.

He picks listlessly at his toast, nibbling on to the edge.

Philza is sitting across from him, finishing off a cup of coffee, distracted by something in a notebook that he's reading. For a bit now, he's been quieter. Not since the resurrection, but more recently.

And the darkness around him has gotten stronger, more distinct. It's like death itself. It makes Ranboo a little uneasy.

Sometimes, the darkness almost takes the form of a person.

He's getting more comfortable around him, though. Slowly. It's a process. Parental figures of all sorts make me uncomfortable.

But Phil is different. Unlike the different parents Ranboo has had, he doesn't look down at any of them, he doesn't talk down or condescend... he just talks to all of them like they're smart and able to make their own decisions.

It's nice.

Phil glances up from his book, and catches Ranboo's attention. When he does, he smiles widely, genuinely. Just that makes him blush with odd pride.

“Ranboo, do you know how to fight with a sword?” He asks casually.

He blushes more. “I... I know enough to not die in a fight...” he says hesitantly. “I’ve never learned anything else. At least, I can’t remember it...”

He smiles wider at him and nods. “Would you like to learn?”

He can’t help but smile as well, feeling surprisingly eager about the concept. He sets his fork down and fiddles with his gloves instead. Is it because he’ll be getting attention? Perhaps.

“I really would,” he says honestly, twisting the button at his right wrist. “If it’s not-- y’know, trouble for you, of course...”

“I wouldn’t have offered it if it was any trouble,” Phil says gently, taking the last drink of his coffee. “We can start in just a bit, if you want.”

Ranboo can’t help but happily stretch his legs underneath the table, like a content cat. “Oh, okay,” he says somewhat sheepishly. “I want to.”

Ten minutes later, they’re out in the snow, dressed warmly against the spring chill.

Ranboo stretches his body up towards the sky, as far as he can. It’s cold, but comfortable. It reminds him of the End, as usual.

Phil is carrying a pair of swords, one of them being the neat, netherite one he usually carries, and the other being a simple iron one.

He offers it up to him, seeming amused when he happily takes it and tries his best to hold it properly. “It might be a bit short for you since you’re so tall, but it’ll probably be alright to practice with.”

Ranboo’s brows furrow. “Wait, I’d need a longer sword?” he asks, confused. “Is that why it always feels so weird to fight with one?”

Phil laughs, hard, tilting his head back. “That’s probably why, yeah.”

He plays with the sword, looking down at it. The blade is well shined and in impeccable repair. “So, um. What do I do now?”

He gains more respect for the art of swordfighting after his lesson. It’s so difficult-- even the smallest thing, like the position of your feet, completely throws you off.

Phil is a gentle teacher, carefully correcting him when he messes up, praising him sincerely when he does well. It makes him feel like he’s learning well, even if he doesn’t think he is.

“You’re already really good at this,” he says with clear approval, helping him off the ground. Due to his thick clothes, the snow doesn’t burn him. “I’ve taught a lot of people how to fight, and you’re one of two people who’s caught on this fast.”

Ranboo bounces on his toes once he's stable on his feet again. His claws curl in his socks and shoes. "Who else caught on quickly?" He asks.

The older man's smile twists into something a bit more wry. "Techno, actually. Not a surprise there. Of course, it was impressive, because he was seven."

He can't help but laugh at the idea of a seven year old Techno swinging a sword around. He gets the sense that the man was once a small, rowdy child. "You taught Techno how to fight?" He asks, lightly swinging his own sword in hand just to feel the weight of the blade. It's definitely too short, but the feeling of it in his hand is nice.

"I taught him the basics," Phil says, looking down at his own sword. Fondness is clear in his emotions, sweet and sincere. He's noticed him feeling that the strongest around Techno. "The rest was self taught, believe it or not. Between his childhood and when he was a teenager and went through some servers to fight and win games and stuff like that... he's developed quite a style."

Ranboo smiles. He likes hearing Phil talk about his sons, or anything he cares about. Feeling his happiness and pride is so lovely. It blows away the darkness around him with its brilliance. It suits him.

"His style is 'very scary'," he offers. "I don't remember where I learned what I know about swordfighting. I just kinda... know that I can do it? A lot of my skills are like that."

"Like writing?" He offers. "It's some sort of muscle memory type stuff, I'd guess." His brows furrow and curious concern drips onto his happiness. "Do you know how you got your memory issues?"

He fidgets with his sword. Not that they're not moving and he's not thinking about the physical, his anxiety is spiking again and he's starting to feel the guilt again. "I'm not really sure..." he says hesitantly. "I know I was little when whatever it was happened. I can remember some stuff from when I was small, really clearly, but a lot of stuff after that is just gone. And now... it's a little better, since I write stuff down and have people around who can tell me if I missed something... but it's still not good."

He bounces on his feet nervously. His hands feel shaky as the guilt curls in his stomach.

He can't remember a lot of things, even when he writes them down. Even important stuff can slip by him.

But-- but he remembers what happened with *Dream*, during those awful trances. Sure, a lot of the details are fuzzy, but he can remember that it *happened*, that it was presumably bad, that Dream has been getting him to tell secrets...

"I wish there was more I could do to help," Phil says, genuine worry and care in his voice. "My memory isn't great either, but I can't imagine forgetting as much as you do. It must be awful..."

Ranboo picks at the handle of his sword. "It's not great," he says quietly, fixing his eyes on the snowy ground. "It's better now though, I promise. Tommy helps a lot." He pauses, and glances up from the ground to look at the older man for a moment. "He's good at helping with that."

His smile returns and he reaches over to take his hand, taking it away from where he's picking at the sword. His hands are warm and firmly calloused, and it's comforting, to feel someone else's body heat against him, even through his gloves.

"He's very good at that kind of thing," he says sincerely. "He's a good kid. He was so happy when you started coming around before..." he squeezes his hand. "You're a good kid, too. I'm glad you're here."

Ranboo's cheeks go hot and he trills loudly out of happiness. Phil bursts into laughter and tips his head back, gripping his hand comfortably.

He's blushing hard and a combination of anxiety and embarrassment squirms in his stomach. He likes the moment of praise, but it's marred by his dark guilt. He wishes he could enjoy it.

Plus, it doesn't sound true... he's *not* a good kid. *Tommy* is good, he's unbelievably good.

Ranboo is horrible. If Phil knew about what he's done, he wouldn't think he's good. He would hate him.

He would hit me, he thinks despairingly.

"Do you want to practice a bit more?" Phil asks, still chuckling a bit.

Ranboo forces a smile. "Yeah, I do." At least moving around is good for distracting him.

-

Ranboo carefully dries his hair with a towel, sitting crosslegged on the edge of his bed.

His skin is all itchy from his shower. He hates it, but he has *nothing* to fix it. He's sure Techno could help, he made that balm that Niki uses for the ache in her wings and back, but he doesn't want to admit how badly water bothers him. He doesn't want to talk about it, because what is there to do? Water just exists and he has to interact with it. He likes being clean and being able to go outside even when it's snowing or rainy.

He sighs and finishes drying his hair as he's supposed to. Luckily, his hair dries easily most of the time. And when it's just damp, it doesn't hurt him.

He yawns and goes to hang up the damp towel. He didn't sleep well last night, and he won't tonight, but he'll still try it after he reads for a bit. He's tired.

He climbs back into bed and reaches over to brighten the lantern slightly. Tommy is on the other side of the room at their small desk, with his own light.

He adjusts his blankets, pulling them around his sides, and grabs his book.

His hand instinctively goes to reach for his plush, but he can't find it. Annoyed, he has to wiggle out of his blankets again to search the rest of his bed for it, and when he moves them, he can hear it fall on the floor.

"Dammit," he mutters, leaning over the side of the bed to grab the plush.

"Hey, Ranboo?" Tommy asks from the desk, pushing his chair back. He can hear it scrape on the floorboards.

"Yeah?" he replies, reaching down to grab the enderman. "There you are. C'mon, back up here, it's bedtime." Why is he talking to it? He has no idea.

"Are you okay?" Tommy's voice is soft and caring. "You've been acting really weird all day."

Ranboo sits up abruptly, gripping his plush against his chest, his heart tripping, panic curling around his mind. *No no no no-- he noticed?-- fuck--*

He can't see. His vision has gone totally blurry out of panic and fear.

He noticed. Tommy noticed. And he isn't the most perceptive (he thinks this with love) so of course the more aware members of their family have noticed too.

His breath comes out shaky. "I'm f-fine," he says, hugging himself. "That nightmare I had last night just messed with me. That's all."

"Do you want to talk about it now?" he asks, coming over to sit down on the bed near him. Not next to him, yet, but near him. "If it's bothering you that much--"

He wraps his arms around his plush and digs his fingers into his sleeves, trying to calm himself down. "It's not that bad, don't worry. I-I don't need to talk about it."

Tommy narrows his eyes at him, loving yet suspicious. "You've been out of it all day. Are you sure you don't want to talk about it?"

Ranboo makes frustrated ender noises and digs his fingers deeper into his arms. He's not wearing his gloves, so his claws can meet his skin through the soft fabric of his nightshirt. "No, I don't," he says as firmly as he can. "I'm just gonna read for a bit before I go to sleep. That'll help."

He reaches out and takes hold of one of his hands, gently prying his fingers away from his skin. "You don't have to talk to me about it, Ranboo. But I'm worried about you." He grips his hand tightly, keeping his claws can't cut into him. "You've been weird for a couple days, and now you're just-- extra weird. You were zoned out all day, the only time you really seemed awake was when you were practicing with Phil..."

He doesn't move his hand away from he's holding it, keeping his slightly blurry gaze on his own lap.

“I have plenty of things on my mind,” he mumbles, replying as steadily as he can. “I’m not doing good, you know how that is…”

Tommy’s hold on his hand softens slightly, and his thumb gently sweeps over his knuckles. “I do know,” he says softly. “You don’t have to talk about this. I just worry about you.”

Ranboo opens his mouth to laugh, but before he can even consider any words, they leave him; “If I tell you wh-what’s wrong, you’ll be mad at me.”

For a moment, Tommy’s nose scrunches up and his mouth curves into a frown. It all smooths out after a moment, and he holds his hand tight again. “Nah, I won’t be mad. I’ve n-never been mad at you, I promise.”

Well, he’s screwed now. Oh no.

If he says no, he’ll feel even more awful.

And...

And Tommy would be the safest option to tell, he supposes. He’s not scary or hard to predict like Wilbur, nor is he violent like Techno can be. And he’s not an authority figure, so Ranboo isn’t scared of him.

He’s still anxious. But confiding in his friend— brother?— is safe, or as safe as this topic can get.

Ranboo shifts on the mattress. “Y’know how I sleepwalk?” He starts hesitantly, and then to his horror it just keeps coming from him. “It’s not sleepwalking. I don’t know what it is, but it’s some k-kind of trance. I don’t know what I’m doing when that happens, but it isn’t sleepwalking.”

Tommy is quiet next to him, rubbing his knuckles with his thumb. It’s a gentle, grounding contact. He’s so nice to hold hands with, always. His hands are so soft and so different compared to his, no paw pads or sharp claws, just calloused palms and fingertips and blunt, painted nails...

He swallows, hard. “Well, I-I... I know part of what I do when it h-happens.”

Spirit of the End, please give me the strength to admit to my failing.

“I’ve been talking to Dream.”

Panic lances through the avian at his side and a lump builds in his throat when he flinches away, hand leaving his own, body shuffling a few inches further down the bed.

Ranboo hugs his enderman against his chest, face burning with shame. “I know,” he whispers. “It’s terrible. I don’t want it to happen. But I’ve been talking to him and he’s been t-taking me places and- and...” he whimpers.

Tommy is utterly silent save for his slightly heavy breathing. Panic wraps around him like a noose.

It feeds Ranboo's own guilt and fear like wood into a fire. Tears well on the already irritated edge of his eyes and run down his healing cheeks. "Don't hate me," he whispers desperately. "Tommy, I promise I d-don't want this to happen. I'd never h-hurt all of you like that, I-I don't know what's wrong with me..."

After a few more minutes of silence, Tommy shifts close again, and reaches up to brush his tears from his cheeks with his sleeve. He's very gentle, fingers brushing his skin softly.

"Hey," he whispers. "Ranboo, I don't hate you. I-I never could." His voice is hushed, sweet, and Ranboo wants to cry even more. He doesn't deserve the care. "This is scary, I'm not gonna lie. But I can tell you're not- not doing th-this to *hurt* us, y-you obviously feel a lot of distress about it..."

As he speaks, he rubs his dry thumbs against the undamaged portions of his cheeks soothingly. "Where has he been t-taking you? Do you... know?"

He hiccups, unable to keep himself from crying more. "I-I don't, really..." he trails off, wracking his brain. "I... we were in L'manberg, once or twice, but that's the only place I've recognized..."

Tommy tugs him down to rest his head on his shoulder, wrapping his arms protectively around him. Ranboo hiccups and hides his face in his shirt. It's pathetic, but it feels safe. He feels safe with Tommy.

"I'm not mad at you," Tommy assures in a solid voice, no stutter, just comfort and honesty. It simply pours from him, sweeter and more sincere than the panic. "I just-- it's surprising, a- and I worry what Dr- what he wants with y-you... I d-don't want him to hurt you."

He already has, a voice says in Ranboo's head. He's not sure what it means, or why he thinks it.

Dream hasn't actually done much to him, as far as he knows. He's touchy and weird and cruel, but-- but Ranboo has escaped a decent amount of it.

Maybe.

It's just instincts that make him so nervous around Dream, right? The man reminds him of the void, of nothingness... and any self-respecting enderman, even a hybrid, fears the void with superstitious dread along with physical dread.

but it feels like there's something else.

After he was stabbed, Dream... was there.

Not for long, though. He stayed long enough to taunt him (what did he even say?) and then left. *Presumably* .

But when he was getting ready to clean up, after Niki tended to his eye, he noticed... something. Something out of the ordinary, even for his battered self.

Bruises, on his hips. Not just ones from perhaps being punched or kicked or something. They were... distinctly in the shape of hands, holding him. They were vividly red and green.

He wracked his brain for an answer to the question of how it happened, but it didn't matter.

Once he was naked and could see his whole lower body, it just got worse.

Matching handprint bruises on both of his thighs, which were dreadfully sore. Two bitemarks on his legs, one on each side, and a few smaller marks on his hip, on the inner side.

The worst part was--

The blood.

Was it Dream who did that to him? Nothing else made much sense. It's not...

Tubbo, Quackity, and Fundy all have skewed morals, but not *that* skewed. They wouldn't do *that* to him. At least, he hopes.

And Dream-- Dream was the only other person around.

But he left!

Didn't he?

He still hasn't figured it out. But the- the moral is that Dream *has* hurt him.

"I don't know what he wants from me," Ranboo whimpers. "I-I... I'm not special. I can't do anything that could be u-useful for him. But- but I feel like he *wants* me, for some reason."

He's surprised at himself for saying that. It's true, of course, but- admitting it feels weird.

"I don't wanna know h-how his brain works, why he wants what he w-wants," Tommy says, stroking his hair gently. "But it doesn't matter. You'll be s-safe here, none of us are gonna let any-anything happen to you."

He snuggles further into him. He doesn't want to let go. "I don't wanna tell everyone else," he mumbles. "They'll hate me. They already don't like me."

He pauses in petting him, and he can feel shocked amusement flicker through him. "Ranboo, do you... genuinely th-think we don't *like* you?"

His ears droop and he draws his tail around his waist. "I know *you* like me," he says hesitantly.

"I'm not the only one, though," he says, patting the top of his head, right between his horns. "The rest of us love you, man. Like- you don't know him like I do, but the way Techno acts around you sh-should be proof enough? You've seen how scary he can be. But he clearly *likes* you."

He shuffles down to hide further in his shoulder. "I... I *guess* he does...?"

"You're part of our family," Tommy says with aching sincerity. "If you want to tell them—and I think you should," he says casually, sending a shock of guilt and *oh god he's right* and *I owe him* through Ranboo, "no one is gonna be angry. Shocked, maybe. Definitely worried and upset for you. But n-no one will hate you. Wilbur might be a dickhead, but other than that..."

He tightens his arms around him and winces. "I... maybe I'll tell them tomorrow," he says with as much conviction as he can, which isn't much.

"You don't have to," he says, before ruffling up his hair. "I'm gonna go finish my drawing. Are you still gonna read?"

He sits back and wipes his eyes, just in case. "I think I'm just gonna sleep," he says wearily. "Crying and stuff made me tired."

Tommy nods in understanding.

Ranboo lays curled up on his side in bed for many hours, ignoring the dread in his stomach, until he eventually dozes off.

--

Breakfast the next morning is very quiet.

They're all pretty quiet lately. They keep their heads down. There's a lot of anxiety in the air, and it's just feeding Ranboo's own worry.

He's picked a hole in the cuff of his right glove. Luckily, he's wearing his old pair, because he knew he'd be picking at them. He tries to avoid that with the two pairs that Techno has given him, since they're so nice and well made and soft.

He can't talk, during the meal. No one talks much, but when he's rarely addressed, he just ducks his head and refuses to answer. There's a horrible lump in his throat that makes it hard to eat.

After breakfast, they all move to do their own things. Tommy takes his sketchbook and sits in front of the empty armchair, eyes flicking between the page and Enderchest's sleeping form

on the couch, stretched out and as comfortably sprawled as any cat can be. Wilbur sits with a notebook and writes in it inbetween long bouts of gazing out the window.

Techno and Niki are sewing together, sitting by the fire, occasionally discussing something quietly between them. Niki has one wing tucked against her back, and the other loosely resting around Techno, soft white-gold feathers stark against the blood-red sweater he's wearing.

Ranboo manages to make himself comfortable on the couch, next to Enderchest. He has to write some things down just to straighten his thoughts out.

His handwriting is much shakier than usual.

I owe Tommy. He was so kind to me and he said I should do it. He's probably right. They're going to be angry, but if I hide it, they'll be even angrier. Hiding things isn't good. Lying isn't good. I have to be honest or they won't trust me. I want them to trust me. Please trust me.

The only person who seems particularly restless is Philza, who hasn't sat down all morning-- he ate his meal standing at the counter, he stood staring out the kitchen window for a good while, and now he's standing at the bookshelf, looking at the volumes there and not selecting even one.

"I finished this side," Techno says regretfully, holding up the garment he's sewing. From this angle, Ranboo can't tell what it is. "I have to go do the dishes now..."

"I could do them, if you want," Niki offers. "I know you hate them."

He sighs and gets up from the floor, stretching briefly. "Eh, it's fine, I'll get 'em done. If I do them now, I don't have to do the ones after dinner. That falls onto one of you." He flashes a grin at Niki, who returns it wholeheartedly.

Being around them is nice, Ranboo thinks. The emotions they feel around each other are enjoyable, soft things. It's nice to get soft emotions from Techno, because they all feel like lavender brushing his skin. That's a bit of metaphorical language, but he feels like it's true.

Ranboo scribbles on the margins of his page. The sound of ceramic and cutlery hitting each other fills the room, along with the rush of water.

He swallows. "Can I tell all of you something?" he asks, louder than he expected himself to get.

Tommy looks up from his sketchbook, brows furrowed. Niki pauses in her sewing, and Techno turns off the sink for a moment. Even Phil turns from the bookshelf with a frown on his face, concerned. Wilbur doesn't react, but then again he didn't expect him to.

He feels panicky, very suddenly. They're going to hate him. He knows they will. Tommy is-- Tommy is scared of him now, he's sure he is, and the rest of them will be so angry--

He doesn't let himself overthink; he just spills it all, as coherently as he can. The sleepwalking, the nightmares, speaking to Dream, being with Dream, Dream's hands on his

hips—

Techno was holding a plate in his hands as he spoke, and when he mentions Dream the first time, he begins to shiver. The second, and spasms flow through his hands.

He mentions his name once more, and the plate falls and shatters into white bits, like broken teeth, in the sink.

Ranboo forcefully closes his mouth, pressing his hands over it. Tears well in his already irritated eyes and the sound of the breaking dish repeats in his head. Not good. Something being broken is never good. He's in trouble.

He doesn't try to run, he just keeps his mouth covered so he doesn't start audibly sobbing, locking his eyes on the floor. If he stays still, maybe he won't be hurt too badly. If he runs it's always worse. One of the times he tried to run from someone he was living with (he deeply hesitates to call whoever that was a parent) the man grabbed his tail and yanked on it to stop him, and it hurt for a week.

"Ranboo?" Cool hands take hold of his wrists and tug gently. "Hey, you're okay, mate. Move your hands for me? You're burning them with your tears."

Unfortunately, Ranboo can't push down his fear of being harmed, so when Phil very gently grabs his wrists, he flinches back as if struck. But he doesn't pry his arms away, though he'd like to; this is part of whatever punishment he gets, and he deserves it.

His hands are moved and placed on his own lap. He's not being touched anymore, which is-- *better* , but still not good. He hasn't been hit yet, but he knows it's coming. Why won't he just hit him already?

Footsteps cross the floor and the door is thrown open. Ranboo can just see the pink locks of Techno's hair blowing back as he stands in the wind coming in from outside. "I'll be back in a minute," he mutters out.

Ranboo hiccups on a chirp. He's so angry he can't even be in the same room as him. Stars, he's in so much trouble.

"Is it okay if I hug you?" Phil asks, incongruent waves of warm emotion coming from him. "It's alright if not, but if it helps..."

A... a hug? A hug. He's offering him a hug.

He flinches a little and stares down at his lap, stares down at his hands. "Um... i-if you... if you want to give me a hug..." It has to be a trap, but he doesn't care. He still deserves it, and he could use a hug anyway. He loves them.

Arms wrap around him, and he's gently brought against Phil's shoulder, thankfully not having to lean down too far due to his position. "I'm sorry," he hears himself mumble. "I'm sorry, I-I don't know what's happening. I w-wasn't trying to-- to hurt you, any of you..."

“You haven’t done anything wrong,” Phil soothes, and his cool hand strokes back his hair.
“Shhh, I’ve got you. You’re fine.”

“He’s right,” Niki’s voice, soothing and soft, comes from Ranboo’s side, her hands brushing his arm. “You really haven’t done anything wrong. You’ve been hurt by someone, that’s not your fault.” She rubs his arm now.

“Dream’s still kind of a piece of shit, isn’t he?” Wilbur asks from across the room. “It’s probably not good that he’s been dealing with him.”

“Be quiet,” Tommy snips, oddly intense. Odd warmth fills Ranboo’s chest at the protectiveness.

“Dream isn’t good,” Phil agrees, voice tense, “but Ranboo hasn’t done anything wrong.”

He can’t believe it. Wilbur seems to be right, and he hates it, but at least someone can see how wrong he’s done.

Chapter End Notes

somebody get this enderboy a sense of self-worth

i eternally have snow au brainrot but i can't write 99% of the time and this drives me insane

ghost in the world, ghost with no home

Chapter Notes

philza minecraft chapter.

there's a lot of lore in this chapter dude. backstory. a WHOLE lot of dialogue in this one boys.

this is the second-to-last chapter before a Big Plot Event(tm) so thats very epic!!! get hype for a new upsetting plot event. spoiler: beginning of revivebur redemption arc.

warning for a lot of references to abuse and child abandonment (most of this chapter is talking about how wilbur behaved after phil left), one reference to sexual assault (specifically the events of ch13), a bit of backstory violence, and thats about it i think!! for once we have a shorter list of warnings lmao.

title from ghosting by mother mother!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Phil watches as Tommy flies across the blue sky, his laugh almost audible from the ground, enjoying the wind and sun on his feathers.

He's blossomed a bit, almost back to the kid he raised. He's brighter and happier now, flying, laughing more, joking more. He's still weak, tired, a bit smaller all around.

There's still a light in his eyes, but it's different from the light he had before. It's wonderful, really, seeing him grow and change and heal.

It's making up for lost time, a bit. If that's even possible.

He thinks it might be.

Techno comes out onto the porch. He's looking less and less tired lately. He's recovering pretty well from his execution, though he's noticed that he still can't breathe quite as evenly, or do too much physical work.

Not that he'd admit it. The only weakness he's admitted to is not being able to wear his corsets anymore, which he heard an earful about.

Phil huffs a laugh as his son drapes his arms around him and leans his chin on top of his head. "Hey," he greets, resting a hand on his arm. "Something up?"

“Mmm, no. I’m pretty good,” he says, practically just mumbling. “My ribs’re botherin’ me again, though.” He leans further onto him, hugging him tighter.

He’s been clingier lately, too. He doesn’t mind much, since he admittedly missed having him be affectionate. He’s spent years withdrawing into himself, withdrawing even from him. He misses the affectionate kid he raised for so many years.

Recently, they’ve all been a little off, but Techno especially. The poor man has been through a lot, even just here.

Especially whatever Dream did to him when he showed up, the most recent time. He has no idea *what* , really, but...

(“What happened to your shoulder?”

Techno glanced back from where he was taking his shirt off. “What?”

Phil leaned forward, elbows on his knees. “Your shoulder is all bandaged up.”

“Oh, that,” he rubs the bandaged area. “Uh, Dream managed to cut me while he was here. It’s not too bad, but because it’s on my shoulder it keeps bleedin’.”

His voice trembled oddly. He turned away and pulled his favorite light blue sweater on.)

Tommy lands on the white snow, the downdraft from his wings making flakes swirl up in elegant movements. “Hello!” He shouts cheerfully, throwing his arms out with his extended wings as well. “Have I said how much I *love* flying? Flying is *amazing*!” He spins in a circle, laughing nearly hysterically. A few crows that had been following him caw, presumably with excitement. At least they’re not bothering Phil, right now.

Techno chuckles against the top of his head. “What a surprise, the bird boy likes flying,” he mumbles.

Phil laughs as well, leaning on the railing. “You don’t know what it’s like, Tech,” he says, smiling. “I wish you could feel it.”

“I’ve wanted to ever since I was a kid,” he admits. “Do you remember how much I drew myself with wings?”

“Mhmm,” he nods, smile softening at the memory. “You were so upset that you’d never grow them.”

(“Why not? I want wings.” Techno followed him across the yard, reaching out to cling to his clothes.

“I’ve told you before, you’re not an avian,” Phil replied gently. “Or any other winged creature. You’re half piglin and half human, kiddo. No wings either way.”

He pouted. “But I *want* them,” he said stubbornly, in the tone of an eight year old who doesn’t understand the limitations of life yet.)

“You should’ve just- just been better,” Tommy offers, climbing the stairs. He boosts himself to sit on the railing. “You could have been born an avian if someone out th-there didn’t decide to have a baby with a piglin.”

Techno huffs and Phil can nearly hear his eyeroll. “I don’t know how I’m supposed to fix that...?”

“Time travel,” Tommy says calmly, undoing his loosened braid to begin combing it with his fingers. “Go back a-and guide whatever person i-in the better direction of birds.”

“I think I prefer being a piglin,” Techno says dryly. “I can’t imagine joining the ranks of terrible bird-men.”

“We’re not terrible!” Tommy shouts, passionately waving his hands. Strands of blonde hair that he pulled free from his head while combing it shine in the bright sunlight. “I’m a pretty cool guy, honestly.”

“Sure you are,” he agrees. “Very cool. And not a very loud child.”

He rolls his eyes and leans back, holding the edge of the railing so he doesn’t fall. “I take back any nice things I’ve s-said about you recently.” He stares up at the clear blue sky. “What a mean, *mean* little pig man.”

Phil bursts out in laughter, even as Techno snorts in annoyance and withdraws his embrace. “You’re both proof bird-men are terrible,” he says flatly. “The worst of them, honestly.”

Tommy’s smile widens mischievously, and he proudly hops off the railing, head held high, and strolls to the front door. “I’ll accept th-that. I can be a terrible bird-man.” He throws open the door, going to march inside.

He practically *runs* into Wilbur.

“Oh-” He starts, before snapping his mouth shut and going very still.

Techno’s muscles tense, and Phil can feel his tail whip and brush against his own leg. He’s fairly tense himself, after the last few weeks.

Wilbur pulls a very false smile. He knows what his fake smiles look like specifically; he fake smiled a lot when he was younger, due to being so nervous and damaged.

Though, this one is a bit more barbed.

Tommy’s face is very white. “S-sorry-” he manages to stammer out, eyes wide, moving to duck his head. “I didn’t- didn’t know you were c-coming out here. I-I’m sorry.”

His stutter gets worse around him. Phil’s heart aches.

“It’s fine,” Wilbur ruffles up his hair. Tommy flinches hard and ducks his head further, and Techno begins to growl quietly, like he does just before a fight. “Nothing’s wrong, stop flinching like that.” He laughs, a bit too flat.

“R-right, sorry--” he whispers, still not looking up. “I’ll- I’ll go inside, sorry.”

He ducks around his eldest brother and hurries inside.

“What’s bothering him?” Wilbur asks, brows furrowed, wings flicking with annoyance behind him. “Why did he get so upset?”

Techno huffs dismissively. His tail flicks hard behind them. “You make him nervous, you know that,” he says bluntly. “You do that a *lot* .”

He raises his brows now, mouth curling in a mean smile. “Bold words from you, one of the people who abandoned us.”

He growls. “No, I didn’t *abandon* either of you. I moved out so you would stop *breaking me down* .”

Phil inhales quietly at the implication. He knows, in the logical sense, that Wilbur wasn’t at all kind to his brothers after he left, but-- god, like this, he seems awful. Intentionally, maliciously awful.

“Sure, that’s how you rationalized it,” Wilbur says, before sliding his hands into his pockets and walking down the stairs.

Techno groans quietly and slumps against the railing. “God,” he mutters.

Phil looks at him, inspecting his slumped figure, his deep frown, his eyebrows furrowed, his eyes pressed closed. He raises a hand to rub his temples.

“Was he--” he hesitates. “Was he like this after I left?”

He cracks an eye open. “He was worse,” he says flatly. “He hit me a lot. Broke my glasses, a few times. He never hit Tommy, but he wasn’t nice to him. Passive aggressive, petty, all of that.”

He states it so baldly and calmly that he feels dizzy.

Wilbur always had a temper. And he didn’t handle stress well. But how could it go that far?

It makes sense, though. He put all that stress on the shoulders of a seventeen year old when he left, a seventeen year old with a history of bad reactions and abuse in his past, and he cracked.

It’s his fault, it’s *his* fault that Wilbur, who, even with his temper, was kind and polite and loved his younger brothers with every fiber of his being, became outright abusive.

(When he took him in, he was eleven and small and angry and scared. It was an adjustment all around; Techno did *not* enjoy another person having Phil’s attention, Wilbur was uncomfortable in a stable situation, and Phil had to adjust to another child depending on him.

But his greatest attribute with his kids has always been patience.

“I’m not hungry,” Wilbur mutters, when he peeks into the bedroom to call the boys for dinner. Techno had eagerly gotten up and ran to the table, but that was mostly because he was almost nine and going through a growth spurt.

Phil smiled at his older son and nodded. “Alright, that’s fine. I’ll save you some and you can eat when you’re ready, okay? As long as you eat something before bed.”

Wilbur looked up from his notebook, eyes wide, alarmed. “...I don’t have to eat dinner with you?”

“No, if you’re not hungry I won’t make you eat.”

It was a little thing, but it helped build trust. The assurance that there was always food, not just at mealtimes.

He had learned a lot with Techno, who had equally extreme food instability issues, and a big part of helping with that was allowing him to eat whenever he was hungry.

Within two weeks, Wilbur consistently joined them for meals.

Within a month, he and Techno stopped fighting constantly, and started warming to each other.

Within three months, he allowed physical affection, and also felt safe enough to ask for a guitar.)

Phil realizes he’s shaking.

“I’m sorry,” he hears himself say, oddly detached.

Techno shrugs. “It wasn’t all your fault. He decided to start hittin’ me when I stepped out of line.” He straightens up, physically shaking the distress in his posture off like snow off his shoulders. “I’ll hit him back this time, if it happens.” He turns towards the door. “I’m goin’ to see if Tommy’s alright.”

Phil swallows hard. “No, I’ll do it. I want to see if he’ll... talk about that, with me.” He nods in the direction Wilbur walked off in.

He gives him a suspicious glance, before shrugging again. “Sure, go ahead. Just be careful, he’s probably on edge.”

He nods in agreement and heads inside.

Ranboo is curled up on the couch, directly in a sunbeam, asleep. That’s normal, for the past few days; the poor kid is afraid to sleep at night, because that’s when he sleepwalks, and does gods only know what, usually with Dream. He has both of the cats curled up with him, and it looks pretty cozy, at least.

Tommy is in front of the fire, preening his wings. He has his head ducked, fussing with his secondaries and muttering to himself.

Phil crosses the room, and carefully sits at his side. “Hey,” he says softly, so he doesn’t startle him.

He glances over. Anxiety is clearly painted on his face. “Hi,” he replies, before returning his attention to his wings. “I messed s-some of these up when I landed, and I can’t tell which one is making me all itchy...”

He tilts his head. “Want me to try and get it?” He asks, looking over what he can see of the feathers.

He doesn’t look over this time, continuing to shift feathers around and straighten them up. “Maybe, let me keep trying for a bit.”

Phil nods, shifting on the floor and moving to sit more comfortably. He probably shouldn’t be sitting on the floor—he’s been sore lately, because he’s been *doing* more lately. Fighting monsters at night with Techno, helping cut firewood, cleaning, general activity...

He’s avoiding his feelings and he’s *aware* of that, *thank you*.

He takes a steadying breath. “Tommy, can you tell me about how Wil treated you after I left?”

To his worry, Tommy briefly stiffens, wings ruffling with agitation and eyes flicking up to meet his. His hand is hovering still over two misaligned feathers. The anxiety on his face becomes thicker, more serious and immediate.

“What...” he stops and closes his mouth, swallows, takes a deep breath. His heart aches at how he has to steady himself to say it. “What do you know?”

“Techno told me he was abusive,” he says, opting for pure honesty. “He said you were never physically hurt, but that it was more emotional...”

He nods, dropping his hand from his wing to loosely hug himself. “Yeah. Wil never hit me or anything, I th-think he knew if he did that T-Techno would kill him, even back then...”

His wings curve forward to protect him. More ache. “He was *mean*. Y’know h-how good he is with words, and it’s- it’s really fucking *scary* when he yells. And he yelled a lot, if I m-messed up at all he just— *s-screamed* at me.”

Phil offers a hand to him, leaving the option up to him entirely. Tommy’s eyes widen again and he takes it, intertwining their fingers tightly.

“He c-called me annoying and useless a lot,” he recalls quietly. “He always *apologized*, but it never felt... genuine. It was just like h-he knew he had to do it to make me feel c-comfortable again.”

He squeezes his hand. “It goes without saying, but I don’t think you’re annoying or useless, Tommy,” he says, as gently as he can. “No one here does. I don’t even think Wilbur actually does. He was just...”

“Just stressed a-and lashing out, yeah,” he replied wearily. “I know he didn’t really *mean* it. It st-still fucking *hurt* .”

Phil feels like he’s been stabbed.

There are tears welling on Tommy’s eyelashes, threatening to fall, and he looks so small, so hurt, so damaged by his own brother’s hand. By the brother trusted to raise him. By the brother who loved him, once, and maybe still does.

He shifts closer, so he can spread out one of his own wings and wrap it around his youngest son. “I’m so sorry,” he murmurs. “I don’t know how I can even say how sorry I am that I let that happen.”

Tommy shrugs, leaning into him, resting their heads together as his wing wraps around him like a blanket. “It wasn’t a-all you,” he says glumly. “His *boyfriend* made things worse at one point. And then there was— *here* .”

“If I hadn’t left, things wouldn’t have gotten as bad,” Phil says firmly, believing it entirely. Him leaving his sons was the catalyst. “Wil would have never hurt you. He wouldn’t have... become like this. He never would have...” *ache ache ache ache ache ache* , “died.”

“I guess,” he replies, still dull. “I’m not mad at you for leaving us. It was our fault.”

He shakes his head as best he can with him leaning against him. “No, it wasn’t your fault. None of you made me leave. I was scared and overwhelmed and I ran away instead of staying. *None of you made me leave.* ”

That’s the honest truth; he was stressed, yes, and it was because of a situation his boys were involved in, mainly Techno, but it was *not* their fault. He resorted to a childish coping mechanism, physically running away from his problems, because he was *scared* .

“Wil said you left because of what h-happened to Techno, the s-summer before,” Tommy mumbles, almost sleepily. “He blamed Tech for it a-a lot. ‘S the reason he was so m-mean to him.” He brings his legs up to hug them, ignoring his wings now. “He said y-you left because Techno made you too stressed out and th-that you hated us for it.”

Phil tugs him closer, wrapping his arms around him. “It wasn’t that at all,” he says, and it’s mostly true.

He did technically leave because of that summer. But it wasn’t really about that at all, it was just his stress response. He didn’t mind taking care of Techno, who was trapped in a dissociative state for that summer, but it did stress him out.

It wasn’t his sons’ fault, but he knows how it could have *seemed* that way.

“It wasn’t your fault,” he promises quietly, pressing a kiss to the top of his head. “I promise. And I’m not leaving again, I think Techno would kill me for it.”

The mild joke makes Tommy giggle a little, and he drops his head onto his shoulder. “I’m still not mad at you, dad.”

"I wouldn't blame you if you were," he says. "But that makes me happy."

-

Phil stays up late, that night. He needs to talk to Wilbur about this.

Just a little bit, if he can. If he'll allow it.

After everyone heads to bed, even Techno, he approaches Wilbur, sitting on the couch with that notebook he's been scribbling in for the last few days.

He sits down on the cushion at his side and clears his throat. "Wilbur," he starts in a careful tone, resting a hand on his shoulder. "I need to talk to you."

He glances up from his notebook and frowns. "What?" His voice is sharp, defensive.

Phil takes a deep breath and reaches up to pick at the feathers sticking out around his collar. "I was talking to your brothers about... what things were like, after I left," he says, as cautiously as he can.

"Were you?" Wilbur asks. "And now you're going to ask me if their exaggerated version of things is true. Well, it isn't." He erases a word in his notebook.

"No, I was going to ask *you* what it was like," he corrects gently. "I want to know, genuinely."

His eldest son briefly bares his teeth, but he's unintimidated.

He closes the notebook and tosses it aside. "I don't want to fucking talk about it," he says bitterly. "Why would I talk about it with *you*? If you cared about how it would have affected me, you wouldn't have *left*."

The words sting a bit, and Phil bites his tongue. "I know it was a selfish, cruel decision," he says, honest. "I can't... put into words, how much I regret doing that to you. To all of you, but especially you."

Wilbur crosses his arms and leans back on the couch, scowling and dark. "If you had *thought* about it, you would have realized that... I don't know, eight years ago."

He takes a steadying breath. "I realized that within two or three years, Wil. Once I managed to clear my head a bit. I would have come back, if I could've."

He couldn't, and it was all *his own fault*.

He was still a desperate man, even after all that time. He went to the End on the whim of promise that he'd be able to fix things for himself, for the people he loved.

("Endermen have that kind of thing figured out," the wild-eyed adventurer had said, clutching a glass to their chest, hunched over the bar. "It's horrifying. They can bring *anything* back.")

People muttered around the small, dark tavern, largely ignoring them.

Phil fidgeted in his chair for a moment, before getting up and sitting next to the adventurer. “Are you being serious?” He asked, looking sidelong at them. “About knowing how to go to the End?”)

And then he got trapped there for the equivalent of... gods, fifteen years?

No wonder he’s so unsure of how old he is.

“Of course you would’ve,” Wilbur says bitterly. “You realized your mistake and would have come back, but you *couldn’t*. You expect me to believe that?”

He grits his teeth. “Do you want to know the honest, complete truth, Wil?”

“I don’t expect it from you.”

Phil pushes his hands into his hair and undoes the braid he had it in. (Ranboo did it for him, excitedly weaving the strands together and talking about how calming he finds braiding.)

He’ll admit the truth if it makes his son forgive him.

“Six months before I adopted Techno, my wife died.” His voice is flat, and he doesn’t look at Wilbur. “I was still grieving when I found him. And I never... processed it, really, because I gave myself a responsibility. It distracted me, to have someone to care for. But I was still grieving, the whole time.”

He pauses. “I *still* am.”

“I tried to resurrect her. Four times. None of the attempts worked, she-- she was too far gone, I guess.” He raises his fingers to tug his ring out from under his shirt. He buried her with hers, even though a small part of him wanted to keep it. “But I was still so desperate. It’s... it’s such an overpowering thing, that kind of grief and desperation. So when I left... I didn’t mean to, but I started looking for ways to bring her back.”

He glances up, through a few strands of his own hair.

Wilbur is deathly silent, staring at him with a flat expression, though his wings have twitched up with anxiety. It’s a tell he knows so, so well.

Phil leans back on the couch and scratches the back of his neck. “No one talks about resurrection,” he says, playing with his ring. “It’s not something anyone can be proud of doing. That kind of magic isn’t good for you, isn’t good for your soul, your body, your *mind*. But I was desperate, Wil.”

He runs his hands through his hair again, feeling fidgety. “I met someone talking about the End. I always believed in it, but I never believed the stories of how horrifying it is. But... this person, they talked about how endermen had perfected this kind of necromancy, with some kind of technology they developed in their dimension. They talked about dying and being

dragged back by endermen. They were terrified and traumatized and-- and I asked them how to get to the End."

Wilbur audibly swallows. "To bring her back?"

"Yeah. They said they didn't need a body, just someone who cared for them, and I-- I loved her so much, Wil. So I found the stronghold they used, and put the eyes of ender where they belonged..."

He stared at the portal for a long time. Unlike a Nether portal, this one didn't glow, but rather seemed to absorb light with its bizarre, spacelike, flowing form. The heat of the lava below made him sweat under his thick diamond armor (netherite wasn't commonly used yet, and wouldn't be until he got back) and he was terrified.

But there was a *chance* .

"I went in. I don't..." for some reason he chokes, "I don't know how to describe how the End felt. It was... crushing. The atmosphere felt oppressive, like the whole void was pressing in on me, like it wanted me *out* . I had an awful headache for the entire time I was in there, from the pressure alone. The air was so thin, like when you're flying high, and it smelled too sweet."

He swallows hard. "I was tricked. That person made me believe the endermen could help me-- but they couldn't, and *wouldn't* . There was a dragon, in the End, circling these bizarre pillars made of obsidian, getting energy from these crystals..."

He stood on a platform made of obsidian, keenly aware of how small he seemed in comparison to everything else. He felt frightened and unequipped to handle whatever was ahead.

And that was before the dragon swooped down. She was large and had scales that shimmered like purple pearls, dagger-sharp silver teeth and spikes lining her body. Her wings made her look like nothing, tens of feet long, casting huge shadows as she flew.

Phil knew, instinctively, that he had to kill this dragon, and that he was not ready.

"I killed her, somehow. I don't remember now, it was such a long, horrible fight-- I nearly lost more than one limb, and I broke a lot of bones. I was poisoned, too. Her breath was some kind of toxic gas." He wants to cough at the memory. He was sick for what felt like weeks, coughing, occasionally vomiting up a horrible dark-purple substance... "Finally, I killed her, and she disintegrated. There was this... structure, in the middle of the floating island I was on, made of bedrock, that I thought a portal would show up in. It didn't."

He pushes his hair off his face and looks at Wilbur, whose blank face has cracked slightly, gently and full of concern.

"I was trapped there for three years," he continues. "I met a lot of endermen, of course, and I learned their language. One of them, who escaped and then came back, spoke a good bit of

English, so she was my guide. We tried so hard to make a portal, and we eventually did. But that time, those three years..."

He clasps his hands on his lap. "It was terrible. It was the equivalent of *fifteen years* there, Wil. All that time, I wished I had never *left*, had never been so selfish and desperate and *scared*."

He reaches over to grip Wilbur's hand tightly. "So that's the truth. I made horrible decision after horrible decision, and I got trapped for it. I chased a fucking *phantom* of hope, and ended up trapped in my own personal hell." He cracks a weary smile. "So I never made it home."

"I..." his eldest son pauses. "I need... time, to think about this. B-but... I'm sorry, that any of that happened."

He gets up quickly and hurries off to hide in the bathroom.

Phil slumps back.

He doesn't know if that helped. But everything is out on the table, motivated by his son's own bluntness. He wanted to be calm and kind, but...

Gentleness won't work on this new version of Wilbur, it seems.

-

(Cool air blows through the house, and a certain breeze is more concentrated.

Kristin floats across the blue rug on the loft. She's already looked over the other children, so she checks on Techno now.

He's deeply asleep, laid out on his back, growly snores leaving him. His hair has worked its way out of its braid in places, so long strands of pink are spread out on his pillows.

She smiles softly and reaches down to pet his cheek. He scrunches his face up in response to the cold sensation.

She floats across the room, and sits on the end of Phil's bed.

None of them can at all see or hear or perceive her, but... she's still watching over them. Especially him.

He's hidden under his own wings, quiet as the grave (ironically) and breathing deeply.

She's still there.

No one will ever see her, but she'll keep an eye on them.)

dove update: they still haven't gotten me scheduled for any sort of treatment because they probably need more testing :'-)

please send me good luck, or prayers if youre the sort of person who does that. to be real this is a giant drain on my mental health, not to mention my physical health! so lets all collectively hope that before the year is over, i can get help <33

also to any of my bros out there with chronic pain, just know that we were given this burden because otherwise we'd be too fucking cool.

have a good day! drink some water. pet a cat.

not a chapter/update!

hi y'all! dove here.

if you've been following along with my writing/my tumblr, you probably know i suffer from unexplained, very bad chronic pain. we have no clue what causes it, and getting medical help has been... not easy. my case has been mishandled so many times, it's like the medical staff where i live is trying to catch a bar of soap they've dropped in the shower i stg

to make a long, exhausting story short, i'm moving across the country to get to an actual city (not a shitty small town like i'm in now) and try to start things again over there. this is how desperate it's gotten!

but the reason i bring this up (other than to complain) is because my pain and the stress it causes me have slowly eroded my ability to write; some days are better than others, but generally i'm too tired/in pain/out of it to write. i draw a lot, but that takes less mental energy for me. that's why chapters (especially for this fic in particular) tend to take a good while; i have to write them slowly. and it blows, because i love writing! i think about snow au a lot, at all times! but my pain just doesn't let me write lately.

so, this fic is going to be on a kind of hiatus. i will update eventually! it's not cancelled forever. but i move next week, and then i have to get settled in, and then we're gonna start getting medical stuff worked out. as much as i wish it was easy, it's kinda hard to squeeze fic writing into that!

i really love sharing this au and my writing in general with everyone who follows my blog and interacts with this account. this is the most attention i've ever gotten on a fic and it makes me feel so proud of myself!! i am very thankful for the support and stuff, and i hope y'all don't mind waiting a bit longer for me to pick this back up!

i'm picking away at the next chapters; i have a few partially written and a *lot* of stuff outlined. i might post snippets on my tumblr (hydrangeasheart) so if you want behind-the-scenes info and art and little pieces of writing, along with interacting with me, please follow me there! i don't tend to reply to ao3 comments, but i do see them and appreciate them <3

anyway, that's the update on what's going on for me. was it necessary? who knows. thank you for all of the support and kind and funny words and comments and asks and everything that's been shared with me! let's all hope that 2022 is a better year for dove (and for all of you!) <3

- dove hydrangeasheart xoxo

they did what they had to do

Chapter Notes

HELLO GAMERS i have returned!!! tentatively!!!

if you'll let me ramble as an update: i moved!! i now live with my partner-in-brainrot, certified cool person, and co-author, abigail deathsquiggles!!! i've gotten to talk about snow au with my own real words and mouth. epic, i'd say. i'm still getting settled in and my pain is still High as Fuck (god i wish i could say the same) (just kidding don't do drugs kids and if you do, do them responsibly, with company) but i'm inspired and ready to start working again. also i'm getting my name changed and that's very poggers.

anyway!! onto the actual chapter notes!!! so. this is a little catch-up chapter before we get into a New Arc(tm) of the story!!! fuckin. snow!wilbur redemption begins soon. but right now we just get to look at all these cool folks and see what's goin on in their heads!! the only person not involved in this chapter specifically is philza, because we know how he's feeling and it is not good. this chapter has taken me ages to write because oh my god dude my body is *crumbling*. i'm 800 years old. i'm not super happy with it but i want to share it with you guys!!! look at it!!! get out of my documents!!! it's worrying me to not write plot stuff!! now i'll go write something stupid and unrelated.

warnings for past and current abuse, self harm, references to sexual assault, underage alcoholism (kind of a standard warning when tubbo is around) references to injuries and stuff, and possession stuff. but there is also some wholesomeness and bonding, for the kids. i think that's all but i might have missed something!!

title is a modified lyric from devil's backbone by the civil wars!! extremely snow au vibes.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Niki kneels down to pick up the pieces of coal she just carved from the wall, tossing it into the bag they're carrying it all in.

There's dirt and coal and whatever else under her nails, in the lines of her palms, staining her blouse. She can taste the dampness of the cave air, the burning of the torches, the thick dust of stone and dirt around her.

It's helping her stay distracted, so it's nice. And the warm bath she's planning to take when she gets home is a pretty good incentive to work.

Regardless of the distraction, she's still annoyed. There's too much on her mind.

(She can only think about Wilbur's anger. Every night is an argument, and she's exhausted. She knows it has to be worse for the others, but even *she* is tired of it.)

She stretches up to grab her torch from the wall and ducks out of the small alcove she made while mining. Techno is sitting against the wall, digging through his bag.

She gently tosses the bag of coal next to him. "Find anything good?"

He glances up, raising a brow. "Nope, not really. Think Phil found something, though, he's over there. You hungry?"

She nods and sits next to him. He offers her a sandwich wrapped in butcher paper, and she takes it. She unwraps it on her lap and starts eating. "Thank you."

He hums in response, taking an apple from his bag and crunching into it.

Niki likes keeping busy with other people. It's easy to get lost in work with Phil and Techno — they can both get so singlemindedly focused on things, just like she can sometimes, so it's... almost comforting.

She's not alone in distracting herself in chores and gathering resources and work. In doing something for other people.

(She doesn't know when she picked that up. Maybe when she was younger, trying to get her parents' attention...)

"We should probably head back soon," Techno says, nudging her gently. "It's a bit of a walk home, and I'm *not* gettin' stuck in a snowstorm."

Niki giggles and nods. "Yeah, that would be bad." She pauses for a moment, looking at her sandwich. "Has... has that *happened* to you?"

"When I was younger," he shrugs. "I got lucky and it was a short one. I just hunkered down for a bit and waited until I could get home. Wasn't much fun, though. I felt like I was freezing for a week."

She frowns at the idea. "I like it here, but I would like it more if my feet weren't cold all the time."

He laughs, his casual smile turning into a full grin, and she feels warm at the sight. She doesn't know why, but ever since that horrible execution, she's just felt... so comfortable with Techno. He feels like a friend.

She feels like it's something deeper than them just getting along; she loves it when they get into deeper conversations, because she's learning that they share a lot of thoughts about certain things.

She also loves learning little details about the man, like how he still sleeps with a plush pig (she even has a name!) and how his claws and fingertips are naturally blackened and how he's embarrassed by the way he talks because he very rarely has a lisp.

She learns small idiosyncrasies as well, how he always uses the same coffee mug and brushes his hair starting on the left side and imitates the bird noises that the other avians make. He pulls on his clothes and hair when he's nervous and can fall fully asleep sitting up and loves flowers because he grew up without them.

"This place would be perfect if I could have a flower garden," he told her one evening, while she was cleaning up her kitchen and he was sewing at her kitchen table. "Potatoes are nice, but I really like flowers."

"There are flowers that can grow here, aren't there?" she asked, wiping off the countertop. "Peonies can handle frost, I know that much."

"Eh, I think it's too cold even for that. Maybe I'll ask in the village next time I'm there, I'm sure they know what can be grown..."

Sure enough, the next time he went to the village, he came home with a bag full of small, wrapped peony plants, along with some hardy deep blue irises. He was so excited that his tail was whipping side-to-side and he kept shaking his hands around, a happy reaction she was told has been one of his since he was a kid.

He spent the rest of the afternoon planting the flowers under the windows, digging into the hardened, frosty ground. Niki joined him, and she's never seen him so happy. Gardening/farming seems to be something that just fills him with joy.

Philza comes up the slope of the cave, his bag thrown over his shoulder, his wings drawn in close to make sure he can fit. Niki finds the size of his wings-- much bigger than could *ever* be proportional-- pretty amusing, especially in smaller spaces.

"If you don't have anything good, I'm leavin' you in here," Techno says, tossing his apple core aside. "No free rides. Pull your weight, old man."

"Watch your mouth or I'm cutting you out of my will," Phil says casually, coming over and tossing the bag down. "I found a *lot* of lapis. Probably useful for all the enchanting you've been doing."

"I'm makin' new armor, so yeah, it'll be useful, thank you."

Niki giggles to herself and folds up the paper her sandwich was on. She tucks the rubbish in her bag, before getting up to stretch. Her muscles are tense from *days* of pure physical activity, not resting enough, stress...

The walk home is mostly quiet. It's not snowing yet, but the air is bitterly cold, the clouds curling around the horizon telling of the coming storms.

They're all quiet with tension, but she likes it. Not the tension, but the way they can just... be quiet together without it being awkward.

With this route, they pass the frozen lake, smooth and glassy under the dim afternoon light. She looks over at the surface and smiles.

“Do either of you know how to ice-skate?” Niki asks without thinking, watching a rabbit hop along the edge of the lake now.

“I do, but Techno isn’t balanced enough,” Phil says, before laughing sharply when Techno tries to elbow him. “I’m not wrong! You can’t keep your balance in skates.”

Niki giggles and covers her mouth. “I haven’t skated in a long time, but I love it,” she sighs.

Techno glances over at her, adjusting his braid to keep it out of his face. “I think I could probably get you some skates, if you want,” he offers, in the open way he tends to offer to just *get* her stuff.

She pauses on the faint path they’re following, eyes widening, a surprised warmth welling in her chest. Techno is... very giving, in a way she never expected from him, and it always makes her feel so odd and warm inside...

“You’d do that for me?” She asks tentatively.

“Of course,” he replies, tucking his hands into his pockets.

She grins. She didn’t even need to ask, did she?

“Thank you,” she says, feeling her tension just disappear from her shoulders, from her head, from her wings.

She steps over to throw her arms around Techno, tucking herself against his chest in a tight hug.

“Mhm, sure, you’re welcome,” he ruffles up her hair and then pats it down again.

She pulls away, and with excitement, she takes his hand.

The idea of going skating is one of few things she’s wanted to do for a while. It’s been that and thinking about- about confronting Wilbur.

The tension returns for just a moment, and she forces it all away, grits her teeth. She’s not thinking about it. She’s going to go skating and she’s been busy and she’s not alone. She can enjoy the rest of the day, and think about that later.

She’ll confront Wilbur another day. She’s somewhat confident she can help him realize he’s being awful.

-

Tubbo washes his cuts off under the cold tap, watching the red blood swirl as it goes down the drain. He dries them with a towel and bandages them carefully.

Cutting didn’t fix the shivering edge of a breakdown that’s chewing up his brain like a virus, though.

He's not sure what set him off. He was fine, just a bit ago. He wandered around L'manberg for a while, appreciating the spring warmth and flowers and growing things. He even smiled, because he saw some bees.

(The smile turned bitter when he heard his own voice echo away after his instinctive "oh! A bee!")

But now, he's stuck pacing his room, arms stinging from fairly deep cuts, head aching, *desperately* trying not to storm into the kitchen to grab a drink.

He doesn't need to drink. He has to stop. It's not healthy.

He's barely seventeen, dammit, he doesn't need to fall into alcoholism. *He doesn't need to be like his father .*

"What are you doing?"

Speak of the devil.

"Nothing," he mumbles, continuing to pace. "Leave me alone."

Don't leave me alone, please. I don't want to be alone. I want you to be nice to me. I want you to care for me.

"Nah, I don't think so." Schlatt settles himself on the edge of his dresser. "Why are you pacing so much?"

Tubbo grimaces and scratches the bandaged cuts on his arm. Razor cuts are always itchy. "I cut myself," he mumbles. "Pretty bad. And I'm really upset about it." He turns from his desk to his bed and then back again.

"Why would you do that?" He asks, and it's almost genuine curiosity.

"I'm trying not to drink," he replies. "But I need to do *something* ."

Schlatt hums. He has a cigarette in hand and he flicks invisible ash to the floor. "So you cut."

Tubbo scratches the bandages. "Yes," he says irritably. "It didn't help."

"What reason do you have to *not* drink?"

He grits his teeth and walks over to his bed again, dropping to sit down and holding his head in his hands. "I don't want to be like you," he says, too honest for who he's talking to. "Fuck, I *really* don't want to be like you."

"I'd say you already are," he says, not entirely without sympathy. "I mean, you clearly want to die. Speed it up. Drink, keep cutting, whatever."

His stomach twists and he moves to lay down, feet dangling off the edge of the bed. "I don't want to die," he says, and it rings a little hollow. "Not really. I just... I'm just..." he swallows

hard. “I’m alone. I hate being alone. And if I’m drunk or passed out I can’t feel alone...”

“Then knock yourself out, kid.” Schlatt is watching him, he can feel it, those white eyes on his body. “Because, between you and me, you’re gonna keep being alone at the rate you’re going.”

Tubbo wants to open his mouth and say something cutting, but his throat feels tight and he’s crying again. “I don’t want to be alone,” he says, like a child. “I want my *friends* back. I want everything to be *normal* again.”

He wipes his eyes forcefully on his arm and crawls properly into bed. “I want to be *happy* again,” he whimpers, getting under the blankets, probably to sleep. It’s only three or so in the afternoon, but his sleep schedule has been fucked for... *years* , now.

There’s a lengthy silence. He destroyed his clock one day while he was drunk, so he doesn’t even hear it ticking. It’s so quiet that his head hurts.

After a few minutes, Schlatt floats over to sit on the edge of his bed. He has a peculiar expression on his face, brows furrowed over his pure white eyes, mouth softly frowning.

Tubbo can’t repress his instinct to flinch when the ghost reaches up towards his face, but—

But he just pushes a lock of his hair from his face, and begins halfheartedly stroking his head. He’s not making eye contact.

The contact is sweet. Maybe too sweet, maybe not what he deserves right now, maybe not like what he expects from the man.

It feels nice. He shouldn’t melt into it, but he wants to. He hasn’t had this brand of gentle contact in years.

He closes his eyes and leans up into his hand on his head.

His fingers, cool and oddly solid, push his hair around his horns. “You need to get some sleep,” he says, quiet, and-

And it feels *normal* . It feels like he’s just a father putting his son to bed. And it’s true; Tubbo hasn’t slept enough in *years* . He’s tired all the time. If he doesn’t pass out, he usually doesn’t sleep much.

He has nightmares every single night. Bad ones. They lead into hallucinations and sleep paralysis.

(He’s had problems with sleep paralysis since he was little.

When he was four, he got out of his first episode of sleep paralysis and ran to his father’s room in tears, terrified that something was horribly wrong with him, that the black figures he saw were going to hurt him even in the waking world.

And that was just the first taste of what would become a worse and worse problem.)

Tubbo's eyes flutter open, and he looks up at his father above him.

He's gazing away from him, but his fingers are still petting his hair, gentle and cold, and it feels normal but it's *not* .

In context of everything else, of the past few years, it just tastes bitter like the last dregs of coffee and he feels angry instead of *sad* , now.

"Stop touching me," he says, and his voice doesn't crack. "Don't *ever* touch me."

There's a moment that's charged and still like the air before a storm, where Schlatt still has his hand resting on his head, palm against the awry strands of his hair and fingers tangled in the locks, and if he had space for anything but the anger now eating him up he would be scared.

It passes, and Schlatt withdraws his hand. "Fine, kid. Whatever you say." His voice is calm, just like normal, like he's touched him gently at *all* in the last few years.

(He has.

Tubbo didn't know how to tie a tie, back during his father's presidency. He had never worn a suit before.

He was fussing with his tie, unable to make it right, getting frustrated. He didn't want to get in trouble for not wearing it, but he couldn't get it *right* .

He let the two ends of the damn thing dangle against his chest as he glared at himself in the mirror. Ugh...

"Hey, kid," Schlatt said, very suddenly in the doorway behind him.

Tubbo jolted and turned around, eyes wide in fright and surprise. "I-I, uh, hello," he said, waving meekly. "I'm just... f-fixing up my tie, I'll be done in a minute."

He turned around again, trying to tie it once more. But the knot ended up getting too tight below where he needed it to be, and it didn't even look good. He groaned at the result and started *un* tying it.

Schlatt came up behind him, and reached around to grab the tie. Tubbo went completely tense, an odd part of him telling him he was about to be choked—

But instead, he deftly undid the knot, and straightened the green fabric out.

"Your problem is that you're starting with both ends even," he said, in a gentle tone that Tubbo hadn't heard in at least six or seven years. "This one is supposed to be longer. And you cross them like this..."

He watched with quiet astonishment as his father carefully tied his tie for him, going slowly so he could see every step. After just a minute or two, the green tie laid neatly against his chest.

Tubbo stared at his reflection, at the two of them. Dressed like that, his hair neatly brushed, his eyes visible, standing straight...

He and Schlatt looked like family. Like they *fit* together.)

He gets up from bed to storm across the room, out the door, and then to the kitchen. He notices he isn't followed, but he doesn't care.

He pours himself a glass of wine and sits at the kitchen table to drink it. Part of him just wants to drink from the bottle, but that's... he's not that far gone, at least.

He feels tired and alone. The gentle touch reminded him of how much he craves it. When was the last time someone touched him? Maybe the last time he saw Dream?

He misses Tommy. He misses being able to crawl into bed with his best friend, or sit next to him, or just be in the same *room* as him. It's been so long.

He still feels bitter and lied to by the other boy, but that doesn't stop him from missing him horribly.

Even if he had to plan his funeral, and was led to believe he was dead... he still wishes they could be *together* again. He wishes he hadn't reacted the way he did when he visited. He was drunk, more so than usual, and acted without thinking. And it was so, so *stupid* of him.

Tubbo bounces his leg under the table. He's already half finished with his glass, and it was a generous pour.

Not surprising at all.

-

Tommy winces as he pats the cuts on his inner arms with the wet cloth. They're not bleeding too much, but they hurt badly.

He needs to give up his knife...

Shame and guilt bite at the bottom of his throat and he hiccups, trying to hide his desire to sob. It would be too loud, and someone could hear. He's already pushing it, sitting in the bathroom for this long, this late, with the light on.

Someone is going to notice, and then he's going to end up *crying* about it. He doesn't want to cry, but he knows he will.

He fumbles to get bandages from underneath the sink. His hands are shaking horribly and he drops the roll of bandages and the small box of plasters twice.

(He had a horrible, awful nightmare.

Dream was staring over him, holding his axe in hand, pointing towards a hole in the ground.

“Put everything in the hole, Tommy.”

Tommy was kneeling, hugging himself, digging his fingers into the suede of Wilbur’s old coat. “No,” he whimpered. “I-I don’t want to. It’s a-all my stuff.” He reached down to grip the handle of his pickaxe, fingertips scraping the ground.

“Shut up and do what you’re told,” he snapped. “Do it, or I’ll take that compass of yours.”

He grabbed onto his compass and pressed it against his chest, holding it to his heart. “No, no, no-” he gasped, feeling himself go pale. “Please, Dream, just l-let me keep my stuff!”

Dream stepped closer, and grabbed his hair. He jerked his head up to look in his face, and placed his axe against his neck. “I really don’t ask much of you, Tommy. Quit being fucking stupid and do it.”

Tommy shook his head as much he could, but before he could get away, he swung the blade of his axe into his throat.

He felt the intense, painful sensation of his skin and tendons and muscles tearing open, blood spraying out in an unnatural arc before his vision blacked out due to the pain.

He woke up choking and feeling like he was burning from the throat.)

He sinks to sit down on the floor, on his knees. His knife is clean and he washed them, so he should be okay to just wrap them up...

He can hear footsteps outside the door, and goes still, biting his lip hard, barely breathing. He can feel the throb of his cuts in time to his heartbeat, too fast, way too fast.

“Tommy, I know you’re upset,” Ranboo says through the door, quiet.

“Don’t y-you know not to bother a man when he’s in th-the bathroom?” Tommy isn’t sure where the snippy reply comes from, but he’s glad for it.

“I do, but you’re not *just* in the bathroom.” His voice is a little shaky. “I can *feel* how upset you are. Please, can you talk to me?”

Tommy’s heart twists. He can hear the sincerity in the boy’s voice, curling around his words.

“...don’t b-be mad at me,” he whispers. “I-I... I cut myself. Not- not too bad. But they *hurt* and I’m trying to get th-them covered up—”

To his surprise, Ranboo immediately slips into the room, opening and closing the door so quickly and soundlessly that it’s like he teleported.

(A few nights ago, when they were both up late, avoiding nightmares and trances, Ranboo admitted that he *can* teleport, but loses memories when he does.

“Whatever causes my memory loss, it affected my teleportation too,” he said, picking at his pajama pants. “It kinda sucks. I’d like to be able to teleport.”)

The tall boy kneels next to him, and his expression is tight with grief and sympathy. He's not crying, but his eyes are wide and glossy.

He gently takes hold of Tommy's arm to inspect the cuts. He lets out a murmured word in ender and grabs the bandages.

"Clean?" He asks, looking up at him.

He blinks a few times, confused, before understanding. "Oh, y-yeah, they're all clean."

He nods, before looking closer at them. Whatever he sees, it causes him to shake his head dismissively and begin wrapping his arm.

He obediently lets it happen, chest feeling tight and warm. The care and tenderness he's showing is... nice. It still feels so nice and unusual when people are gentle with him.

He fixes the bandages, getting them secure. His eyes are narrowed at the white fabric.

He brushes his fingers over the bandages, rubbing them with his thumb, before taking both of his hands.

Tommy squirms, feeling the weight of Ranboo's concerned gaze. "I..." he stares at his bandaged arms. "I-I'm sorry."

After a beat of silence, Ranboo chirps at him and drags him into a tight hug, practically pulling him into his lap as he nuzzles against his hair and makes scolding ender noises.

He's not sure how to react. The embrace is both restricting and deeply comforting. He's unnaturally warm and he can hear his heartbeat.

He exhales heavily and rests his head on the taller boy's chest, focusing on his heartbeat. He finds it... oddly soothing. He wishes he could understand what he's saying, but the hum of his voice is still nice.

He hugs him back, feeling small and protected. He can't explain how or why Ranboo's hugs are especially comforting and safe-feeling. Despite his angular form, he's soft against him. His heartbeat is unusual and odd but deeply soothing.

Maybe it's because he knows the two of them would do anything for each other. They've promised each other that. And even with the upsetting development of Ranboo's nighttime trances and speaking to Dream, too much of Tommy trusts him to be fearful. Ranboo has never laid a hand on him, never tried to fight him, never so much as said something rude to him. Even the times he teases him aren't mean.

He trusts him. Maybe the most out of everyone here.

"Back to bed," Ranboo says, just barely understandable.

Tommy nods, preparing to wiggle his way out of his arms, but his progress is cut off and he chirps in alarm as he's easily picked up and carried out of the bathroom.

Huh. He... didn't know Ranboo was that strong. Well, Tommy isn't *that* heavy, but he's heavy enough that it shouldn't be that easy. And yet, he's being carried to their bedroom, by Ranboo's near-silent tread. For someone so tall, he moves so quietly.

He's laid down in his bed, among the sheets and blankets and pillows and such that make up his nest. (It's still kind of hard for him to nest, after exile. Dream hated it, for some reason; he probably just didn't want Tommy to feel comfortable or safe whatsoever, the prick.)

He vaguely expects to be tucked in like a little kid, but instead Ranboo crawls into the nest with him, throwing his arms around him again and holding him against his chest.

There wasn't even fear when he crawled into my nest, Tommy thinks. Usually, he feels nervous, even a bit fearful, when someone who's not an avian gets into his nest. Even when he was younger, he'd get a bit upset when Tubbo or Techno got into his nest.

But with Ranboo... it just feels *fine* .

He hugs him as well, snuggling against his brother.

Brother . Ranboo is his brother, just as much as Techno and Wilbur are, he's absolutely sure of it.

He presses his face to his warm chest, listening to his slow heartbeat.

His brother is protecting him and holding him, despite his immature reaction to stress being to cut open his arms. He doesn't care that he did something so dumb and self destructive. He just wants him to be okay.

He tries to curl closer, if possible. They're all tangled up together, in that cuddly, comfortable way that Tommy isn't sure that he's ever shared with anyone, not even Tubbo.

It makes him feel like he can be okay, despite everything. Despite losing so much, despite bringing Wilbur back (the emptiness that settled after the resurrection is able to be ignored now) despite being such a wreck even now, he feels like he can be okay.

-

It's an hour before dawn. Ranboo just finished the history book he borrowed from Techno, after three nights reading it.

He writes down the last of the notes he has about the book, before closing the heavy leather cover. He'll ask Techno about them in the morning; he knows a lot about history, especially Nether history, which is what the book detailed.

And it makes him happy, which is always nice. It's nice when he's happy. He has a good smile; with inexplicably perfect, sharp teeth, all perfectly lined up and straight. Ranboo himself is a little jealous; his front teeth are fine and straight, but all of his fangs are a bit crooked.

He places the book and his notes on the bedside table. His lantern flickers as he does so.

He glances over at Tommy's bed. He's fast asleep, curled up in his blankets. He's noticed it's become a bit of a round nest in the last little while. He wonders why he wasn't nesting like that before, it seems fitting for someone who's part bird.

He sighs and stretches his legs out on his own bed. He's so sleepy, but he doesn't like sleeping at night. He doesn't think that his enderwalking (the name they settled on for his trances after Techno saw how his eyes apparently turn pure purple in that state) is directly caused by darkness, but it feels safer to avoid it.

His enderman plush is getting raggedy. He's had it for years and he sleeps with it every day, so it's been through it. The embroidered eyes are fraying, as are one of the shoulder stitches. The fabric is rough with age. It's stuffing is all weird, too.

He picks it up and tucks it against his chest, hugging it.

He can't even remember when or where he got this. He just knows it's a comfort item, one of few he has.

And the void only knows how much comfort he needs right now.

When they discussed how to deal with his enderwalking, there were many ideas thrown out. Night watches (which they do when he's agitated, but not every night) and sleeping potions and staying up a bit later and all kinds of stuff.

Wilbur had been at the edge of the discussion, leaning against the kitchen wall with his arms crossed as the rest of them discussed at the table.

During a lull, he spoke up.

"Why don't we just put him in the basement?" He offered casually. Everyone looked at him with shock. "What? It might work. Put the kid in the basement, tie him up, and then he can't walk around and talk to the server's resident creep."

Ranboo promptly began having a panic attack at the idea. He doesn't know why. The idea is unpleasant, sure, but his immediate reaction was one of pure fear, like... like he knows what that's like.

Maybe that was caused by one of his lost memories? The context is gone, but the feelings remain.

He curled up in his chair, folding his entire long body into the space provided by the seat, breathing raggedly and mumbling in ender. Tommy and Niki had rushed to comfort him and talk him down.

Through the haze of his panic, though, he heard the altercation that took place during his attack.

Phil immediately stood up, wings extended, protective anger burning in him. "What the hell is wrong with you?" He asked, glaring at his son. "That's entirely inappropriate, you can't-- what *makes* you think suggesting to tie a *teenager* up in a basement is okay?"

He might have been panicking, but he still felt a deep pride when he realized what was happening; he was being defended by his... his *father*. To one of the man's other sons.

Even in his nervous nighttime state, Ranboo giggles and covers his mouth. He has a family now, despite everything else.

He cuddles up with his enderman, fiddling with one of its floppy arms. He gets comfortable against the pillows again, drowsy but too alert and uncomfortable to sleep.

Tommy sighs in his bed, chirps, and then turns over. Ranboo watches him through lidded eyes.

He's glad Tommy's not having these particular problems with sleep. He's still having a lot of nightmares, and they stress him out, but Ranboo knows that he wouldn't be able to deal with whatever causes his enderwalking. He just knows it would exhaust him, hurt him, deal him damage that can't be fixed.

He doesn't deserve it, but Ranboo does. Ranboo is horrible and deserves this situation, no matter how much everyone tries to convince him he's good.

This wouldn't be happening to him if he was good. He deserves it.

He suddenly feels too tense and upset to lay down. He tosses his blankets aside and gets up, grabbing his notes and the myth book. He'll go put it away. If he's quiet, he won't bother Wilbur.

He creeps out into the living room, tiptoeing, bare feet padding on the cool wood.

Wilbur is sprawled out in his bed, snoring quietly, and entirely unconscious.

He creeps to the bookshelf, and gently puts the book back onto the shelf.

"What are you doin' up?"

Ranboo trills in alarm, jumping more than he expects, and his head whips around to look at Techno, who's lounging on the couch and looking at him with raised brows.

He flushes and steps closer to the bookshelf, feeling nervous. "I, um-- I can't sleep..." he trails off. "I'm too worried."

Techno frowns at him, brows knitting together. He has a book open on his lap, a finger resting on the page to keep his place.

Ranboo fidgets with his bracelet, the one with the glass beads painted like eyes of ender.

"Do you... do you think that talkin' about it would help?" Techno asks with clear hesitation.

He sighs a little, sinking down into himself a bit. "I don't really think so," he admits. "It's just... I'm worrying about Dream, still. I'm scared."

“Yeah, I’d imagine.” He hums faintly, and then gives an awkward smile. “Come sit with me. D’you want a distraction instead?”

He wants to hesitate, he wants to resist the promise of contact, he doesn’t deserve it, especially not from Techno, but he does as requested, coming over to curl up on the last cushion.

“A distraction would be nice,” he says quietly, looking at the fire.

“Mm, alright.” After a few moments of consideration, Techno clears his throat a little. “When I was little, I was in the Nether by myself.”

It’s an unusually open statement, and Ranboo peers over at him through strands of white hair. His cheeks are slightly flushed and he’s looking motionlessly at the book on his lap.

“I was too,” Ranboo replies. “Well, not the Nether. But I was alone when I was small too.” He draws his legs up to hug them to his chest. “I don’t remember it very well, but I can say that about a lot of things…”

“My memory isn’t very good either,” he says, with a slow, careful kind of consideration in his voice.

The conversation stalls.

Techno is nice, but he’s not very good at talking. Ranboo noticed that a while ago. He tends to stay quiet unless he’s interested in what’s being discussed. That’s fine, really; some people are just quiet.

But… he *would* like to talk more. He definitely needs a distraction, and he doesn’t want to talk about his childhood.

“I finished that book you lent me,” Ranboo says, fiddling with his bracelet again. “It was… pretty interesting. Where’d you get it?”

Techno makes a somewhat excited noise, and closes his book eagerly. “It was interestin’, actually, I met this- this scholar, I guess? He was weird, this tiny avian guy who was exploring the Nether all by himself… but I met him while he was explorin’, and he told me he was writin’ that book. He said it’d taken him… thirty years? He sure didn’t *look* that old, though.”

He sets his book aside and starts messing with his hair, fingers wrapping around stray curls that have escaped his loose braid. “He asked where I was stayin’, and I was… curious, so I actually told him. He said he was just about done with the book, and that I could have a copy. It was really weird, but I don’t know how to explain just how *off* that guy felt. He brought it to me a couple of days later, when I was just about to head off… and honestly, I think it was worth it. There aren’t many books like that.”

Ranboo nods in agreement, smiling. He likes when someone actually gets him talking. “I think so too. I liked the part about the suspected history of the fortresses, it sounded so…”

unreal, I guess. But it makes sense, too...”

Thinking about how many years of history about the Nether, and endermen, and every other creature, just *exist* out there, makes him feel oddly small, makes him feel like he’ll never be able to learn it all. He wants to learn everything, but he has no way to do all of that. He forgets what he learns...

“Most of the stuff I know about piglins came from that book,” Techno says, leaning on the back of the couch. “People don’t talk about them a lot. But they’re- uh- they’re really interesting, actually.” His cheeks are slightly flushed again, excited.

He peeks over at him again, before grinning. “Tell me about them?” he suggests, wanting the distraction. “Do they really raise their kids like it says?”

His eyes widen a little, and he grins as well. “They do,” He says eagerly, before beginning to explain.

Ranboo lets the topic and information wash over him. Over the next few minutes, as Techno explains things about piglins do in their society, he leans over to rest his head against the top of his own, getting comfortable without even thinking about it. Again, he doesn’t deserve the comfort, but he can’t help but sink against his unnatural warmth.

He lets himself stay distracted. Techno doesn’t stop explaining, continuing every time Ranboo gives him a quiet prompt to do so.

After a while, he basically dozes off, to the sound of Techno’s low voice and the warmth of the fire and the way he waves his hands illustratively for certain points.

He doesn’t deserve it, but he dozes off.

-

“ They’re devious tricksters, tormenting their victims with visions of their bodies and features distorting in ways that perfectly reflect their fears... In early stages, they leave mutilated animal corpses where they’ll surely find them... ” Purpled reads in a mumble, brushing his fingers along the lines of the book. *“ Their known weaknesses, in terms of victims, are shapeshifters and slimes of all kinds... ”*

“Oooh!” Charlie makes a very excited noise and shuffles over to his side, pressing his head against his shoulder. “I’m not weak to these guys?”

“Mhm,” he affirms. “Because body horror doesn’t scare you.”

“Nope! I can stretch out like a monster and it doesn’t scare me!” he places his head comfortably on the ender hybrid’s shoulder. “What kinda demons are these?”

“Flesh demons. They torture people with body distortion and uncanny valley stuff.” He flips past the flesh demon page, sticking his tongue out as he reads. “Dream can’t be one of those, because he hasn’t been doing that. We would’ve heard about it.”

“That’s true! And I haven’t seen him doing any weird stuff like that. Are there demons that like to hurt people? I don’t know a lot about demons, actually.”

Purpled huffs and stops on a short page about possession demons. “All demons *like* to hurt people,” he says, frowning. “Some demons feed on pain, but... they’re the rare kind. The other kinds feed on fears and emotions, not pain directly. People think possession demons, the strongest ones at least, feed on pain in general...”

“Ohhh, that makes sense,” Charlie says, turning a bit to see the elegant text on the faded page. “Demons are confusing. Possession demons are super, super rare, aren’t they? Would it make sense for Dream to be possessed?”

He runs a hand through his hair and looks over the page for what must be the seventieth time, frowning at the text. He’s seen it so many times.

“Possession demons are an ill-researched type, rarely seen and even more rarely caught. They prey on those who are stressed yet brave, and they’re especially drawn to those who have dark, troubled pasts...”

Well, all of that applies to Dream, especially back then...

“Possession demons are known to make deals with mortals they possess, offering them things like power or sex for them to allow the demon into their body...”

Dream wouldn’t have made a deal for power, he thinks. He was so stressed and felt so responsible, but he didn’t lust over power as far as he knew. He was only sixteen...

“Are you alright, Purpled from the wilderness?” Charlie asks in a sincere tone. “You look upset.”

Purpled wipes his eyes on his sleeve. “Nah, I’m fine. This just... doesn’t make sense. Dream acts like he’s possessed, but the person I knew-- he wouldn’t have let himself be possessed for power or anything.”

“Sometimes people hide stuff like that,” the slime says serenely. “He could have been power-hungry back then too. He was power-hungry *here*, and that usually doesn’t just come out of nowhere.”

He shrugs. “I guess. He could have hidden it for all that time...”

He closes up the book. “Can you go get that locked book?”

“Yes!” Charlie chirps, hopping up from where he’s sitting at his side and walking cheerfully to the bookshelf. “The one with the eye of ender on it?”

Purpled chuckles a little. “Mhm, that’s the one.”

“I wish I could tell you more around the End,” he laments, grabbing the black, leatherbound book and bringing it to him. “But I don’t think it’s good for me, so I’ve never been there... I don’t know if I can even get in!”

He shrugs. "It's alright. I didn't grow up in the End, so I have no idea what it's all about."

He takes the book. He draws a key, carved with symbols in ender, from under his shirt. It's specifically all in the end dialect, so a lot of words are written differently. Luckily, he can intuit and translate most of it with his own knowledge, and he writes down what words are different.

He clicks open the lock and then flips to the last page he was on.

The book was a gift from Punz, before he ran off. He can't remember why the man gave it to him, but he's thankful; it helps a lot with this branch of his research.

"Here's your notebook!" Charlie says cheerfully, dropping it at his side.

"Mhm, thank you," Purpled replies, staring down at the page. He has a pencil in his pocket, and he takes it out to fiddle with it as he reads. "*To deal with the corpse, it's customary to throw them into the void. Our kind... decay quickly, and that decay can cause horrible illnesses...*" He frowns. "They write *decay* differently, what the hell?"

He scribbles down the word-- "𐐰𐐱𐐲𐐳𐐴𐐵"-- next to the way he learned to write it. It's almost the same, but just different enough, in both form and emotion, that he had to actually think on it. *Ugh*. It's frustrating to read a language so similar to his own. If he wasn't an enderman, he wouldn't get it, he wouldn't be able to understand this through the psychic elements of their kind.

"You have a lot of books," Charlie says, inspecting the bookshelves, standing on his toes to look at the higher levels. "Have you read all of them?"

"Mm? Oh, no, not yet." Purpled scans the next page for anything important. "I'm working on it."

"What are you looking for, anyway?" He asks, taking a large spellbook from one of the middle shelves and flipping it open. "Reading all this stuff..."

He shrugs a little, even though he's not looking at him. "I told you, I'm trying to learn about demons. I know Dream has to be something demonic, I--" He pauses for a moment, throat feeling tight. "I saw *something* happen when I was younger. I saw a demon, and it attacked Dream. So I need to figure out what it was, and what's been wrong with him since."

He flips through the pages. This is all about funerary rituals in the End, but that's not what he's looking for. He wants to know more about the *history*. And sure, this book is more detailed than others he's found about the dimension, but he could do with less poetic language about topics he's disinterested in. Mourning is downstream from society, but it's *boring*.

He scribbles in another detail, about what they do with the terminally ill. They apparently don't let someone just languish; essentially, they *kill* whoever is sick, as painlessly as they can. Assisted suicide. Poison, usually. Apparently the bite of an endermite is deeply venomous.

“And I’m learning about the End because I’ve never been here,” he continues, turning another page. “I’ve learned all I can about the Nether, and a lot of things I learned when I was little, from other endermen, were apparently wrong. Information has gotten mutated over the centuries...”

“That happens to every culture,” Charlie says cheerfully. “I’ve seen many societies twist up their histories over the years. Even overworld endermen have lost their way! And don’t get me started on humans...” He plops down to sit next to him, adjusting his glasses needlessly (his eyes don’t work) and opens up his own book again. “That’s just all creatures are! They lose their histories and their culture and their lives and return to dust.”

“I told you not to talk about things turning to dust anymore,” Purpled says, without looking up. He finally found a page about the history and the mythos of the End.

“But it’s true! Everything becomes dust eventually!”

-

Wilbur sits down uncomfortably on Niki’s small couch, fidgeting with his sleeve. Unusually, he’s nervous. Has he been nervous since he came back? He can’t recall.

It isn’t just being directed to sit down on his tense (former?) friend’s couch with barely hidden annoyance that’s making him nervous.

He’s started dreaming again. Only infrequently, but still. His mind has been offering him nightmares, for the first time since he was brought back.

He keeps dreaming about the explosions and Phil’s sword through his chest and blood dripping down his skin. About his wings being cut from his body, the bizarre sensation of pure, empty grief when he saw the detached limbs laying in a puddle of blood.

Something about Tommy, too, Tommy sitting on dry-looking grass, hair both fluffy and greasy, feathers sticking out at many angles, bruises on his face and arms, his clothes torn...

Tommy sitting on damp, shell-strewn sand, blood dripping from small cuts on his face, soaked in water and coughing...

Wilbur sinks against the back of the couch and hooks a finger under the band of his watch, tugging at it, hurting his wrist.

Niki comes back into the small living room. He isn’t sure what he expected from this new version of her, sharper and less kind and more intense, but he doesn’t think it was her carrying a tray laden with tea and cookies.

She sets it down on the small coffee table, and then sits down next to him, brushing off her skirt with her palms. Her nails are neatly trimmed, slightly pointed, and painted a dark blue.

He glances at the tray. The cookies look like shortbread, round with scalloped edges, and they’re dusted with pink-tinted confectioner’s sugar. The tea smells nice, fragrant and sweet. Steam curls up elegantly from the pair of floral-patterned mugs.

Niki picks up one of the mugs and sips from it. She's wearing lipstick, he notices, a deep red that sets off the pink of her hair.

She lowers her cup and clears her throat. "Go ahead," she says mildly. "You can drink it and have a few cookies, that's why I brought them out."

Wilbur frowns a little, but does as suggested, grabbing one of the cookies and bringing it up to nibble it. It's tasty, soft and sweet and perfectly textured. She's always been the best with baking.

"So," he starts, glancing over at her. "Why did you invite me over?"

She sips from her cup, tapping a finger against the ceramic. "I wanted to talk to you," she says, still very carefully calm. "And I didn't think you would want to talk about this around everyone."

He raises a brow. Hot annoyance simmers with his anxiety. "What could be *that* important?"

She smiles thinly. "I wanted to tell you, with all the kindness I can, that you're being an absolute *asshole*."

The annoyance reaches a feverish temperature of anger and he crushes the cookie in his curled fist, crumbs spilling over his fingers and palm and raining onto the hardwood floor.

"You have no place to talk to me like that," he says, low and dangerous. "I'm not doing anything wrong, Niki. It's *their* fault for treating me like this!"

Her smile drops and she sets the cup down. "They're not doing anything. We did what you *wanted*." Her jaw visibly tenses. He hasn't seen her this angry in a long time.

He vaguely remembers her looking that angry after his wings were cut off, only for a moment, her fists clenching, her eyes widening, her teeth showing, small fangs nestled within...

She's never been this angry at *him*.

"You're being petty and *mean* and- and just keep trying to hurt everyone's feelings," her eyes flare, blue and intense, and they shine in a way that's unfamiliar. She looks like a new person, somehow. A lot of the softness and girlishness she used to have seems to have just melted away like candlewax. "Wil, I care about you a lot, and that's why I'm talking to you like this."

Wilbur grits his teeth and brushes the crumbs off his hand, not caring that they scatter along her spotless floor. His wings have twitched out and he leans back, away from her, keeping his head high. "If you cared about me, you wouldn't ignore how awfully they're treating me," his voice is cool and even.

Niki rolls her eyes, clearly frustrated. "They're doing what they can to work with you, but you're pushing them away. If they're being unkind, it's because you're giving them no *choice*, Wil."

“That’s bullshit, Niki!” He waves his hands in frustration. “I’ve tried to talk to them! They’re either angry or scared of me, and I haven’t done anything *wrong* !”

“Haven’t done anything *wrong*... ?” Niki echoes, her expression twisting, her lip curling back in a snarl. The softness disappears more from her face, and anger fills her eyes. “I could write a *list* of what you’ve done wrong. You forced your father to kill you, you mistreat your brothers, you dragged several children into your stupid political games- and no, I *haven’t* forgotten how young the kids and I were during the revolution. Prime, Fundy was *barely* *twelve* --”

Wilbur hates that anger is the only thing he can consistently feel. (It’s not even a personal anger, even though it should be. She’s accusing him of a lot of things that he knows he didn’t do, that he wouldn’t do. But he can’t be properly angry at the misrepresentation of his intentions; he’s just angry at her tone.)

“You can’t hold that against me,” he says darkly, folding his arms over his chest, drawing his wings in. “I did what I felt like I had to. I wasn’t in the wrong, it was all I could do!”

“There was so much more you could have done!” Niki stands up, stepping in closer to him and crowding him against the arm of the couch. He goes tense with a sudden, skin-crawling feeling that she’s going to hurt him. “You weren’t helpless, Wilbur! You were stressed and breaking mentally, but that did not and *will not* excuse the things you’ve done!”

He rises as well, stepping forward to make her back up. For all her lacking softness, she’s still smaller than him, and she does immediately move back, eyes widening just a little.

He grits his teeth, before forcing a smile. He opens his mouth to say something else, but Niki’s eyes flare again as she narrows them, and she tightens her fists at her sides.

“You are a *petty, vindictive, arrogant asshole* ,” she says, voice like steel. “You refuse to see anyone else’s side of the story, and that’s why you fucked everything up so badly. You’re not always always the good guy, Wil.”

His smile widens, and he reaches out to push her aside, less gently than he should. He storms towards the door.

“I know I’m not a good guy, Niki,” he says, voice hollow. “Trust me, I *know* .”

He opens the door into a quick, snow-blowing wind. It’s hard to see through the flurry.

He takes off into it regardless.

The cold numbs his emotions out again, and he lets it. He doesn’t want to keep caring, not about the things Niki accused him of. He didn’t have a choice.

He’s tired of caring about things. Caring about things has always led him to his worst days.

(When he was younger, he cared so much about his biological parents’ approval. So, so much. He wanted them to love him.

They never did, and at the tender age of nine, he realized he *never* would get it.)

-

Techno takes the blue quilt he used to sleep with, and cuts it up into rags.

He tried to sleep with it, after what happened, but he just felt too sick. The nightmares were awful.

So he'll use it as rags to clean with. It's fine.

He's completely fine. He avoids mirrors, but then again, he's never liked them. He only looks in the one in the bathroom to rebandage his shoulder after a shower.

He thought he'd shy away from touch after what happened, but he finds himself craving it. All of it seems to wipe away Dream's touch, so he consistently seeks it out for what feels like the first time in years.

He lets Ranboo play with his hair, because he loves how soft it is and he can't deny it feels *nice* to have someone do that, and seeks out excuses to put his arm around Niki or hold the girl's hand. When Tommy offers a hug before bed, he accepts and returns it instead of just tolerating it and patting his arm.

He goes to Phil for affection often, too.

He used to do that a lot more, especially when he was little. He had taken a while to get used to the concept of affection, but once he did, he quickly became addicted to it.

("Kiddo, you have to sleep in your own bed sometimes," Phil told him gently, patting his head.

Techno scrunched up his nose and forcefully wiggled his way into the man's nest of a bed, snuggling up to his side. "No," he said serenely.

"Why did I even *get* you a bed," his father lamented.

Cuddling wasn't the only thing he craved; for a good few months, all he wanted was to be in contact with the man.

Clinging to his hand or arm while walking together, hugging him, getting comfortably curled up on his lap or against his back, playing with the soft feathers of his wings... you name it, his young self needed it like he needed water.)

Now, he finds himself laying across the couch with his head on his father's lap, his hand stroking his hair and scratching his head. Or standing behind him to hug him, both protective and craving protection. Or taking his hand whenever they walk together, fingers intertwining. One night, he even fell asleep laying in his bed, head resting on his chest.

(He got fairly embarrassed by that one.)

He knows they all notice, but he really can't help it. The touch helps him stay grounded, keeps him distracted, keeps him from feeling phantom hands.

He sleeps curled up below heavy blankets, to replicate the feeling of being touched. It doesn't really help, but it's better than nothing. It's better than feeling exposed to the dark of the loft every night. He hates *that* , in particular.

He never feels safe. He had eased completely into family life again, for the first time in a long time, and let his guard down *too far* .

Could he have predicted or stopped *that* ? No, he couldn't have. Not without significant damage to himself and/or his family. And he couldn't risk that, he *couldn't* . It's ridiculous, but he'd rather save his family, even at the cost of his safety and dignity.

He'd rather sacrifice himself. They're worth it.

But- but he really wants to think he could've stopped it.

(He feels sick whenever he looks at himself. The bite on his shoulder is awful and looks disgusting, almost burnt.

The rest of the wounds (especially in intimate places) have healed okay, at least. At least there's that.

He feels *ugly* .

And it feels especially bitter, because it's only been fairly recently that he was able to say he was confident in his appearance. That he was able to look at his reflection and say he mostly looked the way he wanted to.

Now, he just hears Dream telling him he's pretty every time he looks in the mirror.

He has to clench his fists and breathe evenly to quell his anger and disgust, and not break the mirror with a single punch.)

He thinks he's doing okay with hiding his emotions on this topic. He knows they can all tell he's upset about something, but he doesn't let it show too much. He doesn't let the *context* show. He doesn't let the truth show.

He can't tell them. They would be angry, he's sure, at his self sacrifice. Heartbroken, maybe.

So he won't tell. He'll think about something

"I still can't believe you let him do that," Wilbur mutters, fiddling with a deck of cards at the kitchen table.

Techno rolls his eyes, leaning up to put away the stack of clean plates. He's repeating that argument yet again, huh? At least he's not suspicious about *him* , he'd rather not get into that. "He asked to do it, and we let him because we thought it would help. We knew the risks, but he insisted he could try it. He's smarter and more mature than you think he is."

(He's personally of the belief that *Tommy* thinks he's smarter and more mature than he is as well, but he feels a bit of an urge to defend the boy from their older brother.)

"He's not old enough to make that kind of decision. Especially if resurrections are as damaging as you all keep telling me they are." He splits the deck of cards in half to shuffle them. The sound is somewhat comforting. "Who knows exactly what it did to him?"

He barely resists another eye-roll. "We let it happen because we were *desperate*. Your ghost wanted it, badly. Tommy didn't want to keep watching Phil nearly kill himself over it." He drops a stack of forks into the silverware drawer and closes it with a musical clatter.

He pauses for a long moment, gathering up the next set of dishes; cups, now.

He frowns and adds, "He did it for *you*."

"I don't think that's true," Wilbur drawls, putting his cards aside. "If he wanted me back, why is he terrified of me now? He doesn't fucking *talk* to me, Techno. He avoids me."

I wonder why, Techno thinks sarcastically.

One day, while he's outside laying in the snow— something he's done since he was a kid, just for fun, even though it worries Phil to death— Niki joins him.

"Hey," she says, laying down on her back next to him, wiggling to get her wings into a comfortable position.

"Hello," Techno replies, staring up at the blue sky. He doesn't think it's ever looked more blue than it does out here. "What are you doin'?"

Niki hums. "I was..." her sentence trails off. "I just wanted to check on you."

His ears go warm.

"I'm worried about you, you're acting kind of weird lately..."

The warmth spreads to his cheeks. Shame boils in his belly and he forces himself to look calm, even as his face and ears are so hot and flushed he's surprised the snow isn't melting around his head.

"I... nothing's wrong," he says, uncomfortable and unconvincing. "I'm just not... I don't know, a lot has happened in a pretty short time for me, and I'm adjustin' to it. You don't have to worry." It's not even a lie, technically; a lot has happened, and he doesn't like change. It's not bothering him *that* bad, though.

Niki goes quiet for several minutes, and for that time, they just watch the blue, blue sky and the way clouds pass and birds fly overhead...

She takes his hand in hers. They're both wearing gloves, but he can feel how warm she is.

“You can tell me if something’s wrong, okay?” She says, voice tender and caring. Techno feels himself blush darker at the kindness; it seems he’ll never get used to it, ever. “I care about you. And I just... feel like something is up with you.”

He hesitates. *Can* he tell her?

Actually, he doesn’t even need to consider it. He can’t. The idea of confessing what he did to protect them makes him feel sick.

It’ll be one of his most fiercely guarded secrets, most likely forever.

“You don’t need to worry about me,” he says, a smile that’s only about half faked coming to his mouth. “I’m okay.”

When he glances over at her, she’s looking at him, eyes narrowed just a little. Her brow furrows over her soft blue eyes, before a hesitant smile crosses her face.

“I’ll trust you on that,” she says, squeezing his hand.

Trust .

He feels guilty.

-

Dream lays out on his back, tossing a small rock hand-to-hand, grass brushing against his head and limbs.

I hope all this lazing around is part of your plan to hold up your end of our deal.

He fumbles with the rock. It hits his knee and he curses. Ugh. “It is,” he says to it, looking up at the grey-blue sky. “I’m thinking of how I’ll get away with it. I don’t want to get stabbed in the chest again.”

That would be inconvenient, it admits. **Though, that wouldn’t stop you, would it? Because... well... I *am* getting hungry.**

He winces and runs a hand through his loose hair. “I’m going to do this... *for you*,” he says, stilted. “Like I said, I’m thinking.”

He pulls himself into a sitting position and slumps slightly. His body feels tired, though his mind is oddly awake.

“Do you really think I can get away with killing Techno?”

I’m sure you can. You’re much more deadly than you realize, baby boy.

“I’m really not.”

I’ve used your body to kill enough times. The muscle memory is definitely there.

“Don’t remind me,” he shudders, getting up to his feet and rubbing his eyes. He starts walking lazily towards his base again.

“We deserve to be locked up,” he mumbles.

A new, sudden wave of alarm/nervousness flows over him, and he stops, hugging himself. *What?* it asks, tone harsh.

His brows raise. He’s never... heard it sound *nervous*. It’s odd and uncanny. “You’ve done a lot of really fucked up things,” he says, slowly, uncomfortably. “We deserve to be, like, in prison or something.”

No, we don’t. Prisons can’t hold me, anyway. It’s so nervous. Why is it nervous?

He has no idea what it’s so nervous about, but it makes him suspicious. “There’s no prison here, anyway, so I guess you don’t need to worry too much.”

It growls, low and evil and so very demonic, and Dream stumbles a little, throwing his arms out to balance. It’s like he was shoved...

I like it better when you’re quiet and asleep.

He feels himself being dragged back into the darkness of his mind. He can’t fight; the feeling is unfortunately familiar and he doesn’t want to- to fight it at all, really.

I’ll let you have control when you’re ready to kill like you promised.

Chapter End Notes

fun fact: the weird nether scholar techno mentions is me. that's me. i have made myself canon to snow au this is happening and you can't stop me. snow dove real.

runs in the family

Chapter Notes

does a wiggly little dance! new chapter new chapter. i am very tired lately but we're getting into stuff i've been especially excited to write!!! :DD

this chapter has been in the works for uhhh a while? before i even ended the first fic i think. i just had Thoughts(tm) one night. and it's exciting to share it with people finally!!!

warning for both past and current abuse, discussions of self harm, and generally just a whole lot of abuse/trauma-adjacent topics and feelings. you know what you're getting into my guys.

title is the title of an amanda palmer song :)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Tommy never thought that he'd get his *fire* back.

It turns out the thing he needed to feel like himself again was his older brother being an asshole to the family who *literally raised him from the dead* .

Who *he* raised from the dead, with a shard of *his own soul* .

“Can you stop acting like we somehow fucking *wronged you?* ” Tommy spits, digging his nails into his palms as he glares across the table at Wilbur. “You wanted to come back! You *begged* us!”

Wilbur's face twists into anger that feels too familiar. “Why would you listen to my stupid *ghost* ? Why the fuck would I beg to be killed if I still wanted to be *alive* ?”

This argument is cyclical. The topic at the center of it is the fact that Wilbur didn't *want* to come back, *apparently* .

“I don't know, maybe because he wanted to actually *try* and be a decent older brother for once? Maybe because he was fucking better than you?” The words come out barbed, painful for him, the sounds scraping out of his throat like sandpaper, but obviously more so for his brother.

Tommy hasn't engaged in the arguing as much. He usually locks himself in his room with Ranboo, reading a book together or putting together a puzzle or just talking.

But something about his attitude tonight is just setting him off. He can't help it; he brings out the worst in him.

Wilbur's anger only seems to rise, his feathers fluffing out and his eyes filling with a fiery light. "I raised you," he says bitterly. "For *six years* , while I was practically still a child myself--"

"And for almost three of those I was basically a child soldier," Tommy interrupts, his own bitterness sinking into his voice. "And for another two I had to watch you get beaten by the abusive alcoholic you were dating, who, oh, *banished us from our own country* later on, because you can't stay away from him--"

"*Shut up!*" Wilbur's fiery eyes only get more intense, and his hand collides with the table, thudding loudly and rattling the dishes still atop it. "You don't understand, that was a complicated situation--"

Tommy snorts derisively (for a moment, he thinks of how obviously he picked that up from Techno) and doesn't back down. Because he's not particularly good at that, even after all this time.

(He's never learned his lesson.)

"It wasn't that complicated, I *know* you," he says, uncurling his fists and feeling the blood on his palms, under his nails. "You can't be alone for more than *ten seconds* , and he had you all tangled up in lies and gifts and *pity sex* --"

"Both of you, *stop it* ," Phil interrupts, voice steely, as he physically puts himself between the two of them by stepping up to one of the free sides of the table. "You're just working each other up, quit it."

Wilbur doesn't listen, because of course he doesn't.

"You don't get to talk to me like that," he spits, coming around the table to get in Tommy's face. He doesn't cower, even when he straightens up to be taller than him. "I did *everything* I could to keep you and Techno alive and okay and happy-- not that you two made it easy on me, you were both *constantly* arguing and acting out--"

He rolls his eyes, crossing his arms, staring up at his brother. "Yes, because putting blame on your *much* younger brothers is a perfectly mature way to look at things--"

Tommy has been slapped plenty of times. With varying levels of severity and pain.

Some of the times were accidents-- a notable one involving a time he startled Fundy and the younger boy just slapped him across the face with all the force contained in his small body-- but more recently, they were all Dream.

Dream, who wore leather gloves that hurt more than normal skin and often backhanded him just so the sharp, spiked button of those gloves would cut him, right along his cheek or back or chin.

Somehow, *none* of this braces him for Wilbur slapping him.

Tommy inhales sharply as the pain registers. His head turned sharply with the strike and his neck hurts, but his cheek is all hot with pain and it feels more pressing.

Tears well in his eyes and he steps back, far out of Wilbur's reach. Without thinking, he curls further into himself, arms around his middle, wings drawing in, shoulders hunching.

Wilbur is staring at him, mouth open, eyes still full of rage but his brows tilted up just slightly, softening his expression.

Tommy hasn't had a bad flashback in a while, outside of his nightmares.

Of course this would be the thing to trigger it.

He stumbles back a little more, and hits the kitchen counter. The jolt of it meeting his back makes him let out a low, pained chirp.

He sinks to the floor, and one of his hands goes to his hair, to tangle in it and pull at his scalp.

He can just hear Dream's voice, sometimes soft and caring, more often harsh and demanding and cruel.

He can feel his hands resting heavy on his shoulders, like he liked to do sometimes, just holding him tightly and firmly in place so he couldn't run away or do anything at *all*, really. He can feel his nails, very nearly claws, digging into his skin through the too-thin, worn-out material of his shirt.

("Where are you going, little bird?" Dream asked, gripping his shoulders from behind. His gloves creaked.

"I-I-- I was going to f-find something to eat," Tommy managed to say, biting his tongue after he stuttered.

His claws sunk into his skin. Little stinging wounds were opened on his shoulders, because they sliced through his shirt like paper. "I told you to get a handle on the stuttering, didn't I?"

He swallowed hard. "You did," he said, slowly, forcing his voice to be even and slow and without flaw. "It's just... *hard*."

"You didn't stutter before."

"I *did*, dickhead," he corrected, not yet having learned how bad of an idea that was. "You just didn't n-notice."

He withdrew his hands, falling entirely silent.

Tommy took the opportunity to walk very quickly into the trees, ostensibly to search for food, but mostly to hide from Dream.)

He hears another smack, followed by a sharp inhale.

“ *Get out of my house* ,” Techno’s voice is even, yet full of a simmering rage.

“You can’t just kick me out—“ Wilbur tries to argue, but he cries out sharply in pain.

Through blurry eyes, Tommy watches as Techno seemingly casually digs his claws into his wrist, where his hand is wrapped tightly around it.

“ *Get. Out. Of my house,* ” he says slowly, his grip almost drawing blood. “I don’t care where you go. But I want you *out* .”

“It’s too cold out, I’ll freeze!” Wilbur manages to free his wrist and jerk back. “Stop acting like it was wrong, he wouldn’t stop *arguing*—”

Techno seizes him by the back of his hair and drags him forcefully to the door, ignoring his protests and pain.

He opens the door and shoves him through. Tommy can’t see, but he can hear him stumble onto the porch. “If you’re willin’ to *hit my little brother* , I have *no* remorse for lettin’ you freeze to death.”

He slams the door hard, and Tommy slips into some level of dissociation.

-

Ranboo lets out a panicked trill when the situation *settles* on him.

The sound of skin-meeting-skin echoes in his head, and he scrambles away from the kitchen, where he had been sitting on the counter. He fell on all fours, but he manages to get onto his feet and grabs his cloak, his boots.

There’s more commotion behind him, he can hear Techno’s voice, and then Phil for only a moment, just one of those chirpy bird noises that’s almost ender but not quite. And then Wilbur says something.

He manages to shove his boots on, untied, and yank his cloak around his shoulders, unclasped, before hurriedly slipping out the door and down the porch steps.

He’s fleeing, because it’s easier than staying.

Niki’s light is still on, so he sprints across the snowy ground to get to her front door, pushing it open without knocking it and closing it a bit too hard behind him. He doesn’t care if she’s in bed or getting ready for it, he just needs to be *somewhere else* --

“Ranboo? Ranboo, *hey* --” Niki’s hands catch his, tug him further into her living room. “What happened? You’re crying, oh--”

She wipes tears off his cheeks with the sleeve of her nightshirt. “Come here,” she says gently, pushing him to sit down on the small sofa. She sits next to him and holds his hands tightly.

“What happened? Were you sleepwalking again?”

The panic wells up to a point that he can't help, and Ranboo lets out a distorted, fearful scream.

He tumbles off the cushions, onto his knees, and moves to instead bury his face against Niki's lap, speaking into the fabric of her pajama pants.

“Tommy and Wilbur were arguing,” he says, words warbling and distorted with ender. “a-and they were both angry, and just getting more and more aggressive, and then- then--”

Her hands immediately went to his hair when he hid in her lap, brushing through it and making comforting noises. She hasn't interrupted him; she's letting him talk.

Ranboo tries to curl closer, wrapping his arms around the girl's legs. Vwoops pass his lips before he's able to finish his statement.

“Wilbur *hit* Tommy,” he finally says, as clearly as he can.

Niki freezes. He can feel her muscles go tense, and he hears her wings flick out behind her.

“...what?” she asks, voice low and dangerous.

His fur stands on end and he pulls away from her slightly. Something is-- very scary, about her anger. It's hot, like magma, and her hands are curled into fists against the cushions.

He glances between her and the door. Does he have to run from her too?

She sighs and relaxes, calmly slipping back into place like magic, stroking his hair back. “I'm sorry, Ranboo,” she murmurs, petting around his horns. “I'm sorry you had to see that.”

He presses his head against her lap again, snuggling in, doing his best to keep her close. The anger is gone, and she's back to being perfectly comforting and safe. Why would he need to be scared of her? She's never hurt him.

“I thought I-I was away from th-that,” he whispers. “I th-thought I wouldn't have t-to deal w-with that anymore. I thought we were safe. B-but-- it happens *here* , too...”

“I'm so sorry,” she replies, voice soft. “How about I make you some tea, and then we'll go to bed? You can sleep in my bed with me, if you want, or I'll make you a bed on the floor...”

He snuffles and curls closer to her, if possible. “C-can I sleep with you?”

She hums. “Of course. Come on, let's get up.”

-

It was surprise, first and foremost, that kept Phil from reacting.

Wilbur hit Tommy, and he was too surprised to even move, staring with wide eyes and open mouth at the two of them.

He... did not expect that to actually happen. Wilbur acting violent towards Techno was somewhat understandable— they're both adults now, and he unfortunately has a history with hurting him anyway— but he didn't think he'd lay a hand on Tommy. By all accounts, he never has before.

But it happened.

(For a solid minute, his instinct to run away almost *won* . He had tensed, his eyes darting to the door, his wings twitching as they prepared for flight...)

By the time that Techno drags his older brother by the hair to the door, the shock has worn off enough for Phil to move.

Immediately, he lets out a worried chirp and hurries over to Tommy, collapsed against the kitchen counters, holding his head in both hands.

His eyes are open, but they're glassy and empty, staring into space. He's not moving and his breathing is worryingly shallow.

He kneels at his side and reaches up to gently stroke his hair back from his face. The way he's cradling his head makes it difficult, but he's able to pry a few strands away from his tear-streaked cheeks.

"Hey, hey," he murmurs, trying to catch the boy's gaze. "Tommy, kiddo, *look at me* . You need to *breathe* , Tommy."

Tommy's eyes refocus slightly, his lips parting as a tiny whimper leaves him. "I-I can't, it hurts..."

Phil places his hand on his chest, shaking his head gently. "No, you can, c'mon," he keeps his voice gentle. "Take a deep breath, Tommy. Just once."

He hiccups, fresh tears running down his cheeks, but he does draw in a deep breath. He's shaking hard.

Techno walks past them, not quite stomping but clearly very upset. He grabs his sword from where it's hanging off a peg on the wall, and goes back to the door.

Phil jolts with realization, and even then, he only barely moves back from where he's trying to soothe Tommy. "Don't go out there and hurt him, Techno."

"I'm not goin' to," he replies, doing up all three of the locks. "The cold will do a better job than I can." His voice holds no mercy.

"I'm sorry," Tommy whimpers. "I'm sorry, 's my fault, I'm sorry, I'm *sorry* --"

“No, no, *no* ,” Phil says as gently as he can, clutching his youngest son’s wrists now, pressing his thumbs against the bones that are still worryingly prominent. “You didn’t do anything wrong, I promise. It’s *not* your fault.”

“I didn’t m- *mean* to make him a-angry, I’m *sorry* , I won’t do it a-again—” he breaks into fresh, agnozied sobs and drops his head, trembling.

“I’m goin’ to *kill him* ,” Techno mutters, pacing the far edge of the kitchen. “I can’t fuckin’ *believe* --”

“Techno,” Phil scolds quietly, as he wraps his arms around Tommy and holds him close. “That’s not helpful right now.” He runs a hand through Tommy’s tangled hair, shushing him as his sobs rise in alarm.

“Yes- yeah, you’re right, I’m sorry.” Techno’s tone has significantly softened. He’s sure he sees the state Tommy is in. “Is he...? Is he alright? Can I do anything?”

He comes over and crouches next to them, hands hovering nervously near Tommy’s shoulders.

“Hold me,” Tommy says, half muffled by Phil’s shirt. “Please.”

Immediately, he does as asked, winding strong arms around both of them. He tugs them closer, protectiveness and anger coming off him in waves.

Tommy continues to cry, shivering in their arms. He feels very small and delicate, like he’s no bigger than he was when they first took him in.

(“Babies are weird,” Techno commented, sitting crosslegged in the floor next to the couch and criticizing Tommy with his eyes.

“He’s not a *baby* , Techno,” Phil corrected, running his fingers through the boy’s newly clean hair. “He’s not much younger than you were when I found you, if I had to guess. He’s just small.”

For his part, Tommy just looked around, something like wonder in his large blue eyes. He was covered in scrapes and bruises, but other than that, he seemed to be in good health, not severely malnourished or anything.

“I think Techno *was* a baby when you brought him home,” Wilbur said, leaning over the back of the couch to look at Tommy. “He sure looks like one in those pictures you have.”

“Hey!” Techno’s voice raised in pitch and he turned his head to glare at him. “I did *not* look like a baby!”

Phil chuckled, but Tommy made a worried sound and tried to hide his face in his hands.

Immediately, Phil drew him in closer and gave him a gentle hug, gesturing for the older two to be quiet.

“Hey, hey,” he soothed, stroking his hair again. “Are they being too loud?”

Tommy hadn’t really answered many questions so far, offering only his name and one-word or nonverbal answers. He seemed distrustful at best, scared at worst.

And he *did* answer, in his own way— he chirped in clear distress and covered his ears.

Immediately, Wilbur cooed at him and made comforting noises, and Techno went red up to his ears. “Sorry,” he whispered, clearly trying to be quiet.

Phil gently rubbed Tommy’s back, in between his fluffy, small wings, still soft with down. “Are you tired?” He asks. “I bet it’d do us all some good to get a bit of sleep.”

Tommy nodded, almost eager, and his wings flapped happily as he snuggled in closer to his shoulder.

“I’m *not* sharing a room with a baby,” Wilbur said immediately. “It’s bad enough I have to share with Techno.”)

“We’re okay,” Phil murmurs, stroking back Tommy’s hair. “You’re going to be okay.”

The words taste like guilt.

Like it or not, *intentional* or not, this is his fault. Wilbur wouldn’t be this way, wouldn’t have let so many bad things happen, if he had never left. If he had just been more resilient, if he had thought it through at all, if he had *cared* more—

He presses a kiss to the top of Tommy’s head. He shivers against him with a quiet, shaky sigh.

He did this to them. His own selfish, childish way of dealing with stress did this to his sons.

He doesn’t think he can ever forgive himself.

“C-can... can I go lay down?” Tommy asks, voice small. “‘M tired.”

“Of course,” Phil says, pushing his hair back from his face. “Do you need anything else?”

He shrugs, still leaning into the arms around him and looking so, so small. “I don’t- don’t think so. I-I just wanna sleep for a while...”

His heart aches.

Techno hums and gently ruffles his hair. “Here, I’ll help you up.”

While his sons get up to their feet and walk off towards the bedroom, Phil puts his head in his hands.

Everything hurts, and he wants to cry, but he isn’t sure if he *should* . Does he deserve to cry? He’s not the one who’s most affected by this.

This is his fault. He shouldn't cry over his own failings, failings that hurt his sons more than he even realized. He feels like he'll never know exactly how much damage he did. Every turn seems to show him more.

If he had thought it through at all, he wouldn't have done that. He would have stayed. He would have *stayed*...

(What would Kristin think of him?)

She would be ashamed to be married to him, he's sure. She would never have forgiven him for doing this.

She would have loved the boys so *much*. He wishes she was here to help with them. This wouldn't have happened if she was here.

His rare good dreams involve her being around to help him raise them.)

(When he was younger, only a teenager, his father had told him he wouldn't ever have a family without fucking it up. Just looking back, at the sisters who hated him and the mother who died because of his birth, he thinks it was true.

He feels like a living curse. He's never been one to wallow in self-pity, but he can't help it now.)

He wraps his own wings around himself and covers his face with the thick feathers.

This is his fault. Not Tommy's fault, not really even Wilbur's fault. It's his fault, for knocking over the dominoes that led to all of this.

Leaving like that lit a long, long fuse, leading to the inevitable explosion, scattering their entire lives with destruction and dysfunction and trauma.

-

Tommy falls into the messy blankets of his nest and snuggles down into the fabric. His hands grab one of the softest looking blankets and wrap it around his shoulders like a cape.

"That looks pretty cosy," Techno says, leaning on the edge of the bed tentatively. "You alright?"

He looks up at him, through his awry hair and around the edge of one of his blankets. "... yeah," he says, voice small. "That was- um. I-I'm still really upset... b-but I think l-laying down for a bit will help."

"It usually does, at least a little bit." He absentmindedly reaches down to pet Tommy's hair. He flinches, and he pulls his hand back, throat feeling tight.

The voices are in an absolute fury right now, their rage and indignation fueled by his own. They want him to go outside and *take care* of Wilbur.

He knows he shouldn't. He *knows* hurting him won't fix anything.

But he keeps thinking about the absolutely *broken* little sound Tommy made when he hit him, and it makes him see red.

Kill him now!!!

Hurt Tommy

Tommy is just a kid

He deserves it

No more Wilbur!

Kill him kill him kill him

"Can you- can you stay with m-me until I fall asleep?" Tommy looks up at him with wide, innocent eyes, like he's a little kid again. He's stronger than any kid should have to be, should ever be pushed into being.

Techno nods, taking his hand and sitting down on the edge of his bed. "Sure, I'll stay right here."

He smiles, small and trembling. "Thank you," he whispers, turning a little to snuggle against the blankets.

He rubs his thumb over his knuckles. Both of their hands are covered in tiny scars...

"Techno?" Tommy's voice is still very small.

He nods in acknowledgment.

"I... um. Th-the knife you gave me is on the desk. You should take it b-back."

"Why would I do that?" Techno is still looking down at their hands, inspecting the small scars, his own claws, Tommy's blue-painted nails.

"I started cutting again." His voice is full of shame. "And y-you said you'd take it a-away if I did. And I don't w-want it in here while I'm so- so upset."

He squeezes his hand, unable to speak for a second. He's not angry, it just *hurts*. Some part of him aches at the thought.

"Okay, I'll take it with me when I go." He rubs his knuckles, and glances up at his upset, teary face. "I'm not mad at you, Tommy."

He sniffles. "I know. I'm sorry."

"Don't be," he says, leaning down to kiss his forehead. "I understand, okay? I don't *want* you to hurt yourself, but I understand it."

(He has a neat line of small scars down his right hip and along the inside of his right arm, just below his elbow. They're from trying to satisfy his patron, admittedly a different motive than traditional self harm, but regardless, he's done it too.)

Tommy wipes his eyes on his sleeve. “Yeah, I... I know y-you get it. I just... feel bad. I was *g-getting better*.”

Techno sighs and runs his free hand through his hair. “You were, but... it’s not your fault that you’re doing worse now, Tommy, I promise. It’s Wilbur’s fault, he’s been actin’ like this and hurtin’ all of us, and I know it’s... a lot harder on you.” He squeezes his hand again, as comforting as he can. “You’ll get better again, I promise.”

His little brother snuggles down into the blankets of his nest again, practically disappearing within the fabric. “I will,” he says, but not entirely believingly. “I’ll be okay.”

“You will,” he says softly, leaning down to kiss the top of his head. “Time to sleep, okay? You look like you need it.”

He wrinkles his nose, mirroring him. “That’s mean,” he mumbles, turning slightly to get comfy. He doesn’t argue with the sleep point, though.

Techno isn’t sure how long he sits there, holding Tommy’s hand, watching him try to sleep, and then fully sleep, the stress and fear on his face smoothing out and making him look younger, smaller.

But he sits there, watching, protecting. Because he has to. He has to be the big brother, because the other one won’t do it properly.

He finally gets up. He gathers up the knife from the desk, and after a moment’s consideration, checks the bedside table for weapons as well.

Before he leaves, he lays an extra blanket over Tommy.

-

Niki sits with her head propped up on her fist, her elbow resting on her thigh.

Behind her, curled up in her bed, Ranboo sleeps quietly. It took him a while to finally fall asleep. He didn’t want to talk much more about what he saw, and she doesn’t blame him.

She’s so *angry*. She welcomes the feeling, welcomes the way it burns in her stomach, wells up in her chest.

Wilbur isn’t going to get any better, and it pains her to admit it. How could he? He hasn’t shown any desire to, and that’s the most important step to getting better.

She shifts to hug herself. He’s not the man she once saw as such a friend, such a kind presence. He’s simply not.

She sighs, turning to lay down on her back in bed, atop the covers. Ranboo hums next to her and snuggles into his pillow.

She reaches over to rest her hand on his back. His breathing is slow and even with sleep.

Is it even worth it, to confront Wilbur again? Or will it just make him angrier?

If she makes things worse, she'll hate herself. But at the same time, she can't really just... sit here and not try to make things better. If he won't do it, won't become better on his own, she has to try. Not for his sake, there's not enough to save, but for everyone else's. They deserve better from him.

(She can't completely lie to herself. She does think there's something in him worth saving. He used to be good, and maybe she's naive, but she thinks he can be again.)

"Niki?" Ranboo's voice is thick with sleep, and he turns over to look at her. His hair falls over the scarred side of his face, and his good eye glows dimly.

Niki turns her gaze back to the ceiling. "Yeah?"

He shuffles closer to her. "Are you upset?" He sounds confused. "You seem upset."

She sighs a little and raises a hand to rub her eyes. "I was just thinking, it's alright." She drops her hand onto his head, which is conveniently just next to her shoulder. "Go back to sleep."

"Mmh'okay." He gently headbutts her shoulder, before going still again. "G'night, Niki. Sleep well." He throws his arm over her middle, effectively trapping her.

She exhales half of a laugh.

(She'll try one more time, to break through all of Wilbur's self-importance and arrogance and whatever else.

And if it doesn't work, she'll willing to help chase him out. In fact, she'd be glad to.)

-

When the door slams behind him, Wilbur can't stop himself from beginning to cry. He doesn't want to cry, he wants to stay angry, but...

But he can't help it, thinking about the horrible fear in Tommy's eyes after he hit him.

He slumps against the porch railing and covers his face, hiding in his sleeves. God, he's a *horrible* person.

All of his arrogance has melted away, and he can feel years of buried, awful shame. He hurt his youngest brother, after years of that being something of a limit for him.

(But was it really a limit? He never purposefully hurt him, but he did put him in danger more than once...)

His face is both hot with a terrible flush and freezing from the quick wind. His nose is running and his tears have made sticky trails down his face. He can't stop shivering. He has his coat on, but after dark, he needs more than that. It's pathetic.

It's all pathetic.

He shouldn't have hit Tommy, of course. But Techno shouldn't have kicked him out, either. He's going to freeze out here.

Which, actually, was probably Techno's plan. He said he has no sympathy for him now.

He deserves it. He knows they must all truly hate him now. Maybe it was a little more dubious before, but now, he's fucked up and severed the last ties.

Part of him wants to say good riddance, and start his life elsewhere.

Another part of him wants to go inside and beg for forgiveness, though he doesn't even feel he deserves it.

He tries his best to wipe his face mostly dry on his sleeves and takes off towards the tree line. Getting out of the wind is probably a good idea.

He ducks under a branch and enters into the embrace of the trees.

There are faint paths in the undergrowth— he's seen Phil go this way while hunting— and he follows them, trying not to stomp. He's unarmed, he'd rather not start a fight with some monster...

After walking for what can't be more than five minutes, past snow-choked trees and brush, a casual, familiar voice says "Odd time for a walk, isn't it?"

Wilbur jolts, stumbling a bit in surprise, and abruptly turns to the source of the voice.

Dream is mere feet from him, in a small, clear circle of dirt, leaning back on a tree. His arms are crossed over his chest, and while his mask betrays nothing, he can tell he's amused.

"I didn't get to choose what time to do this, honestly," Wilbur replies, keeping his distance, watching the man somewhat warily.

"Mmm, yeah, I saw that." He taps one of his long, slender fingers on his arm. "It's a shame Technoblade kicked you out."

Anger twists in his belly, a comforting warmth against the cold, and he clenches his fists.

"That's really the problem here," he says, voice tight. Dream makes a sympathetic sound, and for some reason, he keeps talking.

"I don't know why he kicked me out. First he treats me like some kind of *threat*, and then when I try to work things out so they're not *fucking ignoring me*-- " He sighs heavily and slumps back against a tree. The bark rubs oddly against his wings, but he doesn't really mind. "He kicks me out. Why go through the trouble of raising me from the dead if you're going to treat me like shit?"

After a beat of silence, Dream gives a hum. "Yeah, sounds like they don't even know what to do with you," he says. Something about his tone makes Wilbur's face warm. "It's pretty rich

of them to drag you back to this plane and then treat you like that. I'm sorry."

The apology is unexpected, and it makes Wilbur blush more, feeling oddly giddy. "Y'know, it's whatever, I think..." he tries to say something coherent, but he suddenly feels tongue-tied. It's terrible; he's so good with words until he's flustered.

Dream laughs a little, just a low chuckle. "I have a place nearby," he says, and he can feel the weight of his gaze on him.

He steps forward, and lays a hand on his shoulder. He's warm, even through the fabric of his coat and sweater. "Do you want to stay with me for the night?"

The real intentions of the offer are clear, Wilbur doesn't even need to squint to find it. He shivers, and it's not from the cold.

He needs this. He knows he does. He needs good, concrete proof that he's wanted, even if just by *someone*, even if only physically, even if it's not his family.

"Well," Wilbur says, and he tries not to sound eager. "I can't really stay out in the cold all night, so... I'd be happy to."

The hand on his shoulder quickly moves down, sliding around his waist, and Dream installs himself at his side. "Come on, then. It's not a far walk."

Chapter End Notes

hehehehe

i have so many plans.

see this body, see this body, see this body's not for me

Chapter Notes

wilbur centric chapter..... shorter than usual, but it covers what wilbur gets up to after the last chapter!! hehehehe

i'm struggling physically lol but i am excited to get into stuff that i've been waiting to write for a long time!! exciting time!!

warning for implied sexual content/assault(?) trauma themes, past abuse, and generally just. sad times!!!

chapter title from dead-bird by mccafferty (ha..... haha..... *explodes*)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The blood on Wilbur's knuckles has frozen in the brisk wind. He's shivering all over.

Only a part of the shivering is from the cold, though.

Even just the brush of his sweater and the buttoned front of his coat hurts the resurrection scar. After having it touched so many times, it aches.

He can't go home, even though he wants to, so he needs to find somewhere out of the snow.

He brushes his fingers over the lighter in his pocket. If he can find dry wood, he can start a fire, and at least warm up enough so he doesn't freeze to death.

He snuffles and tries his best to wipe tears from his eyes. His nose is running and his face feels hot with the wind.

He manages to find a small alcove in a large rock wall, just big enough for him to sit down and toss dried sticks and grass together into a weak fire.

Wilbur shivers and tries to get closer to the fire, holding his hands out to warm them. Avians have a hard time staying warm, and he's definitely dealing with that right now. He draws his wings in close and folds them against his back, trying to keep in whatever warmth he can.

He needs to stop crying, but he can't. He stopped crying earlier, before this happened, but after what happened with Dream...

He slumps, thinking about it. It felt like it took so long, but it was barely two hours between him getting kicked out and him fleeing Dream's stupid house.

He had to punch him in the face to get away.

It was too familiar. Too close to old events, old *traumas* . How many times has he had to get violent to stop someone from hurting him? *Too many times* .

“ *You sing so pretty for me, songbird.* ”

He huffs, watching his breath plume in front of himself.

He curls against the rock wall and stares at the fire, flickering, with dead eyes. His chest keeps twitching and spasming like his muscles are being shocked, all along the line of his scar. It hurts.

He can feel nails digging into the healed wound, pain shocking out through the scattered lines and his veins. It hurts so much.

(Do Dream's actions tonight imply anything about what he's done to his family?

He can't think about that yet.)

He sits there for a while. Nearly an hour, according to his watch. He's warmer, but only a little.

He wants to go home. He doesn't deserve it, but he wants it. He's cold and he's scared and he wants to be inside, where it's warm and safe. They all hate him, he knows they do, and he doesn't deserve any forgiveness, but he still wants to go home. He doesn't want to be alone anymore.

Though, his desire to not be alone just hurt him, so maybe he should be. Maybe he should find somewhere to just... be alone. Maybe he should die again, there's no one to stop him... he has a knife...

(He's too much of a coward to kill himself.)

Over the mild crackling of the fire and the wind outside, he can hear footsteps.

Wilbur goes tense. He doesn't have any weapons save for a small pocket knife that he unfortunately found *after* he met with Dream.

The footsteps just get closer, closer, the sound of snow and grass and sticks crunching under heavy boots. He covers his mouth with his palm to muffle his breathing, and he wants to kick out his fire to hide his presence.

Someone is whistling, an odd unfamiliar tune, and he can see a glow through the trees, like fire.

It is fire. As the person gets closer, he can see the flickering flames and the bright light, like a torch or something.

Wilbur swallows thickly and presses himself against the rock wall.

The whistling gets louder, some snow falls from a tree, and a man with a glowing ball of fire flickering on his left hand ducks through the gap in the branches, only a few feet away.

He freezes, staring at him, eyes widening behind blue-red glasses, the fur-lined hood of his coat rustling next to his face.

Wilbur feels himself relax a little. “Jack?” he calls, less hesitant.

Jack blinks at him, the fire in his hand flaring up. “Wilbur?” he replies, the edges of a smile tipping his mouth up just a little.

He smiles back, getting closer to his fire. “What’re you doing out here?”

He shrugs, getting closer, holding his fiery hand out to illuminate his way. “Wandering, I guess. What are you doing? I thought you were dead.” He doesn’t sound too concerned about it.

“I came back,” Wilbur says, voice coming out a little flat. “I’m not sure how I feel about it.”

“Coming back from the dead isn’t all it’s cracked up to be, I’ll tell you that.” Jack comes over to his side, closes his hand to extinguish his fire, and sits down, crossing his legs. “You’re shivering.”

He rolls his eyes and hugs himself loosely. “Really? I hadn’t noticed.”

Jack glances up at him and raises a brow, clearly not amused. “You’re going to freeze, sitting out here. Don’t you have a house somewhere?”

Wilbur rubs his arm and stares at the flickering fire. His heart hurts a little bit, being reminded of why he’s out here. “I... I really don’t know, actually.”

His companion goes quiet. Instead of talking, he leans forward and waves his hand over the small fire. The flames immediately jump up to lick his palm, growing brighter and warmer, glowing white-gold.

“Thank you,” Wilbur says, completely genuine.

Jack shrugs. “Don’t worry about it.” He looks into the fire as well, the flames glinting off of his glasses. His eyes seem to glow dimly.

They sit in silence for a while, watching the fire, not speaking. It’s nice to be near someone who doesn’t hate him, though Wilbur isn’t sure if he deserves that kind of nice moment. (He’s also not sure if Jack doesn’t hate him. He feels like he should, though he doesn’t know why.)

A brisk wind blows towards them, and the fire nearly extinguishes. Wilbur shivers and hugs himself again, and Jack scowls at the smaller flames.

“I hate it out here,” he mutters. “I try not to come here, I hate the cold.” Snow scatters onto his exposed hand and seems to sizzle, his skin glowing like magma.

“Are you okay?” Wilbur asks, hesitantly touching his shoulder.

He shakes his wounded hand, still glowing. “Yeah, I’m fine. Cold water just doesn’t like me.” He rubs the small burn-like wound.

He nods, though he doesn’t completely understand. “You don’t have to sit with me,” he says, staring at their again small fire. “You should get inside somewhere if snow can hurt you.”

“Eh, it’s not that bad.” Jack scratches the skin near the burn absently, he can just see his hands moving. “You look like you need company.”

He feels himself get choked up, about to cry once more.

He *does* need company. He craves it. Especially after what happened tonight.

He swipes his sleeve over his eyes and forces himself not to sniffle like a little kid.

“Why are you out here?” Jack asks, nudging him almost absently with his elbow. He’s incredibly warm, even through the fabric of their coats. He’s not human, no one is around here to Wilbur’s knowledge, but he can’t think of what exactly he is. Something fiery, a Nether hybrid of some kind, maybe.

Wilbur tugs his jacket in closer around himself. “I, uh. I got kicked out,” he admits. “I was staying with my family, and we... got into an argument.”

His chest hurts. He’s not sure if it’s from emotional stress or all the touch to his resurrection scar.

“Must’ve been a pretty bad one,” he acknowledges, his attention on the fire. It’s flickering back to life, through only him holding a hand near it. “Are you going to go back?” He doesn’t sound like he cares. Wilbur doesn’t want him to; there are no expectations, and he really doesn’t need them, not with what happened earlier.

“I don’t know. I can’t just stay out here, but I don’t know if they’ll let me back in.”

He thinks about the cold rage burning in Techno’s eyes before he seized him by the hair to drag him outside. He’s never seen him that angry, ever, not like that.

His eyes burn with tears; he tries to tell himself it’s from the wind.

“You can’t stay,” Jack agrees. “Why wouldn’t they let you in?”

I have no problem lettin’ you freeze to death.

Wilbur lets out a shaky exhale. “I was pretty much told they want me dead,” he says, closing his eyes against the shame of it. “I fucked up, Jack.”

“Clearly.” The unaffected reply is funny, just a little. “What do *you* want to do?”

Now, that's a question. He raises his hands and rubs the heels of his palms against his eyes, sparking bright lights in his vision. It's all he can do to keep from crying.

He doesn't want to say exactly what he wishes he could do. The words stick in his throat, in the way they always have.

I want to kill myself.

He's never said the words aloud.

(He was fourteen the first time he felt that way. He isn't sure why, but he remembers the day well; he was laying in bed on a hot, still summer evening, and he realized he wanted desperately to be dead.

He didn't want to be there anymore. He wanted to disappear entirely, he never wanted to leave the house again, he wanted to *die* .

And then again, at fifteen, shortly after his birthday, when he got rejected by a girl he had genuinely fallen for. At seventeen, for many months on end, primarily because he was overwhelmed. For the entirety of being eighteen, for a myriad of reasons.

The next time he can remember...

He's not sure when exactly. But very abruptly, every cliff, every rooftop, every blade, every sharp rock-- it seemed to beckon him.)

(He's never been able to go through with it. He's attempted, more than once, but he never went far enough.

He has scars down his forearms, and he finds them appalling, but as ugly as they are, they weren't enough to kill him. Not even close.

He tried to overdose twice, and failed both times. He just made himself sick.

There was a reason he had his own father kill him.)

The cold wind seems to cut entirely through him, and he brings his legs up to his chest, hugging them loosely. He feels small, like the world could crush him any moment. And he deserves it.

"You don't know, do you," Jack says, and it's not a question. His glasses flash in the firelight, and he can see a pattern like circuitry in their lenses, over the silver-white frames.

Wilbur shrugs.

His companion rolls his eyes. "You're acting really pathetic," he says, and the fire flares brightly with the clear annoyance in his voice. "You're going to just stay out here and die? That's how you're going to go out this time?"

He blinks in confusion, feeling his stomach twist up with what feels like anger, but it can't overwhelm his sadness and shame.

"You used to be really impressive," Jack continues, tracing his fingertips over the fabric of his pants. "I admired you a lot. But if you're going to throw your life away like this over one fight, I don't know why I bothered."

Wilbur stares at the younger man. Is he... being serious? He sounds like it, kind of.

"I'm not going to throw my life away," he argues, somewhat weakly.

"Then what are you *going* to do?"

"I don't know!" he hugs his legs tightly and tries to fight angry tears. "I don't *know* what to do."

"It'd be smart of you to apologize for whatever you did." The fire flares again. "That'd be the kind thing to do. And I thought you *were* kind."

He groans and covers his eyes. "I don't... I *want* to be kind," he admits. "It's just so hard sometimes. I-I feel like I'm never able to be good."

Jack shrugs next to him. "Being kind isn't easy. *I'm* not kind. But I always admired you for trying."

Something warm and flickering, just like their fire, builds in Wilbur's chest. It's ridiculous, how much the not-even-nice words make him feel more alive, more *real* ... more fragile, as well.

"I *want* to be kind," Wilbur repeats in a mumble, raising his arms to rest his chin on them. "But I... I died. I was killed, by someone who- who didn't want to--" his throat gets tight and he hiccups, "and I hurt people I love. I don't know if I can be *better*."

After a long time of just their fire crackling and their breathing and Wilbur trying not to sob, Jack nudges his shoulder and looks at him above his glasses. His eyes are also red and blue, flickering in the fire.

"I think you can," he says, gentle. "You've always been determined and ready for a challenge."

He finally breaks and begins to cry again, burying his face in his arms. Jack presses their shoulders together and stays very quiet as he sobs.

He barely resists the urge to rock back and forth like a baby. He comforts himself by wrapping one of his wings around himself like a blanket, blocking the wind from him.

He has to fix things.

He has to go home.

-

The walk back through the woods is quiet, but it's not really unpleasant. Wilbur feels lighter, now, with the weight of his emotions having lessened slightly, the heaviness in his chest a bit less oppressive. Crying for a while does that.

And he's going home. He's going to face the consequences of his actions like an adult, despite not really wanting to. It's going to be better. He's going to try to be better.

They're holding hands. He's not sure why, but Jack grabbed his hand when they started walking, intertwining their fingers, and he hasn't had the heart to pull away. Or, if he's being honest, the desire.

As they walk, getting close enough to the house to see the lights, Jack clears his throat. "Uh, so, Niki's out here, isn't she?"

Wilbur raises a brow. "Yeah, she is."

"Is she okay?" When he looks down at him, he can see that his expression has gotten much softer, eyes wider, mouth curved into a more genuinely upset frown. "We haven't talked in *months*. I've tried calling her, but... she hasn't answered. And I'm a little worried about her."

For the first time all night, Jack looks like he genuinely feels something, right down to the mild fire flickering in his eyes. It's... different.

It's hard *not* to care about Niki, though. He understands.

He slides his free hand into his pocket. "She's alright, I think. She's... acting a little different, but she's doing okay."

Jack's eyes clear up, brightening, glowing like embers. "Really? I'm glad to hear that." His hand squeezes Wilbur's own, in what could just be a nervous spasm. The happiness in his eyes and the smile he has doesn't seem to imply that, though. "I'm really, really glad."

Their footsteps are soft crunches of snow. Light from the house is scattering close to them, sparkling on the crust of the ice, flickering in the wind.

The light on the porch is still lit. Wilbur's chest gives an odd clench of love and despair.

"I need to get inside," he says, awkwardly tightening his grip on Jack's hand before letting go. "Thank you, uh, for walking with me."

Jack gives him a smile, an open one, genuine and real. His teeth are sharp, and his canines are slightly oversized. It makes him look younger.

(Just like Niki, he was *very* young when Wilbur met him.)

The brightness of his smile fades quickly, though, and he gives his arm a rough bump with his shoulder before stepping aside. He hides his hands in his pockets and glances briefly at

the house.

“Good luck,” he says, completely neutral again, like he was when they first ran into each other.

Wilbur doesn't reply, looking up at the cabin. He listens to Jack's footsteps retreat, and can faintly see the flicker of his fire before he disappears into the trees out of the corner of his eye.

He doesn't know how long he stands there, staring, feeling his body slowly get colder and colder.

He could just stay here. He could just stand in the cold until he dies.

It wouldn't be actively killing himself, but it would be... it would be close enough. It would work.

But he said he wouldn't.

(He can be better.

He can at least *try* to be better.)

He walks up onto the porch, avoiding slick patches of ice on the cobblestone. He skirts his fingers along the frozen wall, the cold burning his fingers.

The door is closed. He's sure it's locked.

He takes a steadying breath, and knocks on the door, a little more gently than he expects to.

It doesn't take long for him to hear the locks flipping, all three of them, and for the door to open.

Phil stands in the doorway, looking *worn*. His eyes are lined with exhaustion, no sparkle, very little life. He's frowning, brows furrowed, a hand resting on the doorframe.

Wilbur stands in front of him, feeling ripped open in the cold wind and under his wary gaze.

His father draws in a heavy breath, stepping back a little, hand slipping from the doorframe. “Come in,” he says, nodding into the house. “Take your shoes off, I don't want you getting snow all over the floor.”

He disappears into the dim house.

He wraps his arms around himself and steps inside. He reaches down to untie his shoes, and sets the boots on the shelf next to the door.

He closes the door, and walks quietly on sock feet into the house.

Techno is slumped over on the couch, holding his sword, asleep. He's growling, but contentedly, sleepily. The firelight makes his face look oddly intense and statuesque, and his sword glints in the semidarkness.

Wilbur takes his jacket off and holds it in his arms as he walks to the table. He could just go to bed, but he's jittery and uncomfortable. Not yet, then.

He pulls out a chair and sits down. He props his head up on his palm and stares at the table.

He wonders what happened after he left. What happened to Tommy? Did they help him calm down? Ranboo was in the kitchen when it happened, too, where is he now? Niki wasn't there, does she know what happened?

He wouldn't bet on her being ignorant. She surely knows, and she's probably fucking *furious*. The angry girl he saw recently would *not* put this situation aside.

Techno is sitting on the couch with his sword. He's not going to pretend he doesn't know exactly why he was sitting like that.

Is it worth it to try and be better? They're so fucking *angry* at him.

His foot taps under the table. He briefly closes his eyes, sighing softly.

Something is gently set on the table in front of him. He cracks an eye open, and sees a mug of lightly steaming tea sitting in front of him, just being placed down by Phil.

"Oh." Wilbur blinks. "Uh, thank you."

His hand rests on his shoulder, and he rubs his thumb against the bottom of his neck, just above his sweater collar. "You're welcome," he says, and then he places a kiss to the top of his head. "I'm heading to bed. Try and get some sleep."

His hand stays on his shoulder for at least another minute. Wilbur's chest is too tight, and his eyes well with fresh tears. God, he's tired of *crying*.

After a little bit, Phil's hand slips off his shoulder, and he walks away.

He buries his face in his hands, groaning quietly. He feels sick.

Despite everything, he's never been held at such a distance by his father. The way he speaks to him now makes him feel like he's being crushed below bitter, impersonal disappointment.

He presses his palms into his eyes, tears smearing on his cheeks. He doesn't want to cry, but he can't help it. He hasn't been able to stop it, tonight.

Ugh.

He wipes his eyes on his sleeve and draws the cup of tea closer. It's warm against his hands.

He feels *awful* , worse than he's felt... since he died, probably. He'd rather still have absolutely no true feelings, other than brief *anger* .

But he unlocked those feelings tonight. Whatever barrier was hiding them from him has been torn down.

He raises his cup of tea to his mouth and sips from it. It's perfectly warm, and obviously has just enough sugar in it.

Fresh tears roll down his cheeks, and he drinks the whole cup over the next hour.

-

Wilbur starts hearing things in the kitchen around him as he stirs from a dark sleep.

The sound of muffled but heavy footsteps. The sink, running briefly. The sound of something being poured into a cup. A chair being pulled out from the table.

Lazily, he raises his head. The sun is shining through the kitchen window.

Techno is stirring a cup of coffee across from him, staring him down with malice in his eyes.

He blinks in the morning sun, looking at him in confusion. Why does he look so angry...?

Techno doesn't break the unusual eye contact even as he sips from his coffee.

Wilbur sits up in his chair, rubbing his face. His mouth tastes bitter and weird, he apparently drooled in his sleep and his cheek is all sticky, and—ugh— he needs to shave, he's all itchy with stubble...

He rubs his cheek for a moment before it hits him, and he freezes.

That's right. He- he hit Tommy. He hit Tommy and he got kicked out and he- he ran into Dream and Jack and then-

He ran into *Dream*.

He leans back and stares at his hands laying on his lap. There's still dried blood on his knuckles.

He gets up abruptly and hurries to the sink. He scrubs his hands clean under water as hot as he can get it.

He feels sick. He feels nauseous and dizzy and he feels... he feels like he's gone backwards in time, like he's nineteen again, like it's the morning after *something bad* happened.

He turns the sink off and leans on the edge of it.

“ *Songbird...* ”

Wilbur shudders at the memory. He's not sure which particular memory is upsetting him.

He's not sure how long he stands here, but when he comes back to reality, Niki is in the kitchen now, standing next to Techno and talking quietly. When he looks around, he can see Ranboo ducking into Tommy's room.

"I'm going to start on breakfast," Niki says, breaking away from her conversation with Techno. She's clearly very tense, her jaw obviously clenched, and her wings are folded tightly against her back.

"Good idea," Techno says, still sipping from his coffee. It's steaming now. Did he get more coffee? Wilbur must have missed it. "I'll help you."

The two of them start moving away from the table, and Wilbur cringes back from them, feeling oddly frightened by their mere presence.

Niki clears her throat. "Get out of our way, please," she asks, voice cold and intense, like the icicles hanging from the eaves outside. He can see anger in her otherwise calm expression.

He nods sharply, misery crawling up his throat. Tears sting at his eyes, and he suddenly worries he's going to cry again, just like last night.

He goes to his bed, tucked into the corner of the living room.

He sits down, slumped over his own lap, staring at his hands.

A noise comes from Tommy and Ranboo's room. A loud *cry* .

He shudders.

Chapter End Notes

i'm not 100% happy with this chapter?? but i think it makes sense and sets up what happens later. also i like snow jack manifold a lot. him <3

that's all that really matters, i was a fool

Chapter Notes

dove update: hghghgghggh

writing has been an ordeal recently. pain and writers block. it's cringe frankly and im not into it. i wish i did not care so much about making it perfect but what can you do.

but!! new chapter!! it's a lot of setup for later stuff with some side characters, so please bear with me!!! this is almost the end of this particular fic, so that's cool and fun :D

one part of this, the connoreatspants part, is written by my cool and sexy co-author abigail deathsquiggles!! she's epic and she's also why this chapter covers some side characters :3c

warning for mild animal death!! otherwise all the warnings are covered in the tags i think. basically it's a sad time but it's also an interesting time.

title from house of memories by panic at the disco!! :)

Niki carries two plates of food to the table and sets them down carefully, ignoring how her own hands shake. Ranboo looks up at her, his eyes huge with anxiety, while Tommy just continues to stare at his hands, clasped on the edge of the table, scratching lightly at torn skin around his thumbnail.

She sighs and leans down to press a kiss to the top of Tommy's head. He doesn't react, and her heart aches like she's been punched.

She's not sad anymore. She's *angry*.

Wilbur is standing by the back window, staring out at the world, absently fidgeting with a notebook and a pen. He's ignoring them, like he did nothing wrong.

She doesn't remember when she started shaking, but she knows why it's continued. It's because she's holding back from hurting him.

She shakes her head decisively, clenches her jaw, and walks back to the stove.

Techno is quietly making plates. She's not the only one shaking from holding back.

She's seen him angry before, but this is something new, something... almost *wild*. His every movement is sharp and jerky, like he's having to force himself through it. He keeps looking back at Wilbur with something close to hate in his eyes.

She doesn't blame him. Honestly, she's surprised he didn't hurt Wilbur beyond physically kicking him out. She doesn't know if she'd be able to hold back, seeing that.

(If Ranboo hadn't come to her, if he hadn't been laying on her lap and crying...

She would have done something drastic.

For a long minute that felt more like a year, she had imagined it, in harsh black-and-red, her palms tingling with the desire to- to...

She imagined her hands wrapped around Wilbur's throat.)

She briefly touches Techno's back, before taking the other plates to carry to the table. She sets them down in front of the empty chairs, including her own.

Neither of the boys have touched their food.

Niki sighs. "You both need to eat," she reminds gently. "I know it's difficult. But please try for me?"

She doesn't let her rage bleed through, but it's a near thing. She's not angry with them, so they don't need to see her anger.

They were doing so well. Both of them were healing, calming down, learning how to protect themselves...

They were doing *better*. They both stopped flinching whenever people moved their hands too quickly, the tension falling from their shoulders, smiles replacing their nervous frowns...

"I can try," Tommy says in a very small voice. "S-sorry. It's hard to eat when I-I'm upset."

"I know," she sympathizes, giving him her most genuine smile. She doesn't know if it comes off as anything more than a baring of her sharp teeth. Can he tell she's angry? "All I'm asking is for you to try, Tommy."

Ranboo pokes at his food with his fork, clearly unwilling to eat. Niki sighs and kisses the top of his head as well, just like she did for Tommy.

Breakfast passes in mostly silence.

The boys pick at their food somewhat listlessly. Ranboo makes worried noises occasionally, but he doesn't talk at all. Tommy *tries* to talk, but every time someone moves, he flinches and stumbles over his words. He ends up giving up after a few attempts.

Techno doesn't eat. He's fidgeting with his bracelets and bouncing his leg under the table. Phil looks completely exhausted, and as soon as he finishes eating, he goes upstairs to rest. (She's willing to put money on the idea that he didn't sleep last night.)

Wilbur silently eats, staring at his plate exclusively, and he looks... very pale. He has bruises on his neck and a small scrape on his jaw.

She doesn't know how they ended up there, but it must have something to do with him getting kicked out.

She's not sure if she cares.

They move onto cleaning up once breakfast is done.

They pick up plates and food. Tommy washes the dishes, though Niki notices Techno taking out all the silverware and washing it himself. She doesn't know why, but it's not her business anyway.

She helps them gather up dishes. Ranboo wipes off the table and sweeps the kitchen, but he keeps looking at Wilbur with alarm in his wide eyes. He looks like he's going to cry at any moment.

She lingers around the kitchen, trying to steel herself, to prepare for what she's going to do. She knows it's going to be hard.

They're going to end up yelling at each other. The way he acted the first time she tried this makes her hesitant about it...

If he does lay a hand on her, she's cutting it off. She can't let him hurt her, because he's hurt the rest of them.

She runs her fingers over the knife on her belt. She knows better than to give him another chance after this, because she's given him too many already.

She doesn't want to forgive people so easily anymore. Especially not him.

Wilbur is still sitting at the table, staring into the last bit of coffee in his cup, absently twisting his watch around his wrist. He looks older than he really is, all deep lines and darkness on his face...

Niki steels herself, covering up every soft spot she has. It's not hard, when she thinks about how angry he can make her.

She crosses the kitchen and grabs Wilbur by the arm. "You and I are going outside." Her voice comes out sharper and more composed than she expects.

He makes a startled noise, a combined shout and chirp, but he doesn't actually fight her as she drags him from his chair, across the floor, and to the front porch.

As soon as they're alone, the door slammed shut behind them, she turns on him and levels him with her gaze. He cringes a little, and it means something, that it doesn't hurt her feelings or make her feel guilty. Instead, she just sees all the ways he's hurt his family, and wishes she could hurt him in return.

The bitter, mean part of her, the part that craves violence and is as fiercely protective as a wild animal, expands to fill her chest, forcing away any softness she didn't cover.

“You need to start acting better, or I swear, *I will kill you myself*,” she spits, emotions raw, fury dripping from her words like paint. “Focus on the people you’re *hurting* instead of yourself.”

Wilbur’s eyes flash with life, with *emotion*, for the first time since they brought him back. She wishes it was a comforting sight, but it just makes her angrier.

His expression settles into anger of his own, and what must be betrayal. His hands ball into fists. “They brought me back to life against my will! Techno kicked me out, I-I could have died! They’ve been hurting *me*, too--”

“You *begged* them! *Begged them!* So much so that Phil practically *killed himself* trying to bring you back, so much so that Tommy *willingly traded away part of his soul* for you!” She gestures around them widely, her teeth bared, her motions sharp. The cold air seems to invigorate her, somehow stoking the angry fire in her belly. “*You begged them!* Your ghost wanted you to come back and work on fixing things, and maybe it’s not *ideal*, but you’re back and you can’t keep taking it out on them!”

He’s stunned into silence, and Niki glares at him as she tries to catch her breath. She’s so angry and raw that she’s shaking, and images of the younger two in distress flash in her head, which doesn’t help much.

Wilbur opens his mouth to speak again, but he just lets out a distinctly upset avian noise and shakes his head a little. He’s not meeting her eyes. Out of guilt, surely.

She doesn’t like the person she’s becoming, this angry woman, this vicious, furious creature. She’s never felt like this before, she’s never felt this keen anger that springs up so easily now.

“W-we were arguing,” Wilbur starts, his voice trembling a little. “I wasn’t... I-I wasn’t thinking clearly. I didn’t mean--”

The righteous anger builds in Niki’s chest, pushing everything away, and she hears herself *growl*.

“It doesn’t matter if you were arguing!” She cuts him off, her voice as cold as the world around them, if not more so. “The fact remains that you’re messed up enough that you think arguments can be resolved by you *hitting* your little brother! After all you’ve been through, do you really think that will fix anything?!”

Wilbur’s eyes are wide and oddly glossy. She notices him drawing his wings and shoulders in, trying to look smaller, but she doesn’t soften. Right now, she’s hard as ice.

No matter what he does, she’s not letting him off for this, and she won’t go easy on him. He deserves a *lot* more than just her yelling at him.

He draws in a shaky, deep breath, and quietly says, “Please don’t hurt me.”

That conviction to not be easy on him shakes suddenly. His voice came out... *small*, like he's only a child, like he's done nothing wrong. She's never heard his voice like that.

"I know you're angry, and I *know* I fucked up," he continues, voice trembling. "I-I... you have all the right to be angry. B-but please, don't hurt me." Tears well up on his eyelashes and roll down his cheeks.

Niki finds herself shaking again, the iceberg of rage in her chest melting somewhat, her head clearing enough to feel guilt.

Again, she doesn't like the person she's becoming.

She takes a deep breath. Wilbur is looking at her with wide, teary eyes, his whole body drawn into itself, wings drooping, arms wrapped around himself.

She raises her hand to run through her own hair, and he flinches, turning his head slightly.

Like he expects her to hit him.

Half of her crumbles at the sight. This is her friend, someone she loves, someone who she used to think very highly of.

The other half of her spits and curses like something wild, angry and cruel. He hurt a kid, he hurt Tommy, he hurt the little brother who looked up to him so much, who traded *so much* for him to be back...

Wilbur snuffles and begins to cry properly, head down, hugging himself tighter.

The softer side of her wins, though not without a few moments of argument internally.

Niki swallows hard. "Wil, I'm not going to hurt you," she says, and her voice comes out quiet and soft. "I'm angry, but I don't want to hurt you."

He shakes his head, sniffing again. "You should. I deserve it." He's not wearing his coat, and he looks small, diminished, like he did after he lost his wings.

(Her own wings ached when she helped him and Tommy clean up the wounds that refused to close for weeks. Wilbur was broken by that, more than anything else.

"I died, they should've closed up," he slurred out, laying on his stomach on a cot, dazed and out of it from pain and blood-loss. "It's not enough that they cut m' wings off. I have t' suffer more..."

Fundy had been sitting next to his father and holding his hand comfortingly, but the words made him pull away and cover his ears.

Niki fought the urge to glare at Wilbur as he scared the poor boy, and instead went back to applying the last little bit of a healing potion to his wounds.)

(Even then, her anger was something she was afraid of.)

Wilbur keeps shaking his head, staring at the porch now. He's shivering, and the softer part of her gets stronger. "I..." he hiccups. "I'm sorry."

He begins crying harder, little hitching sobs, still trying to make himself small, not meeting her eyes, keeping his head down...

This isn't how Niki planned for this to go. Sure, she expected emotions, maybe some fake crying, but... not this genuine fear and heartbreak.

He's never given her details about his early childhood, and she's not owed them. But he's alluded to *abuse*, and lots of it.

Concern and guilt create a lump in her throat.

"Wilbur," she says softly, resting her hand on his arm. She feels him go tense, as if anticipating pain.

"I know I fucked up," he repeats. "I... I know *exactly* how Tommy feels, with how I hit him last night. A-and if I'm being honest, I did it on purpose. I *wanted* to hurt him."

The anger flares up, but she fights it down. "Why did you *want* to hurt him?"

Wilbur huffs a sound that's almost a laugh. "Because he was telling me how shit of a brother I've been, and I can't accept criticism without lashing out. So I lashed out." He gives a halfhearted shrug. "I wanted to hurt him. Part of me genuinely wanted that."

Niki squeezes his arm gently, unable to speak.

"He's never going to forgive me," he murmurs. "And I don't deserve it. I never will."

She swallows the lump of emotion in her throat. Just a few minutes ago, she would have agreed. But... now she can just see how her friend is hurting, how she might have gone about this all wrong.

"You've been hurting them," she starts in her softest voice. "Part of you wants to, but I don't think you only want to hurt your family." She runs her hand through her hair. It's getting long again and she itches to cut it once more. She takes a steadying breath. "I think you need to at least try to apologize and earn their forgiveness. I don't *want* to give up on you, but that's pointless if you're not even going to *try*."

Wilbur wipes his eyes on his sweater sleeve. "I want to try," he says, still small and quiet. "I want them to forgive me. But I ruined that for myself. You and Techno want me dead, Tommy won't look at me, Phil hasn't gotten better after I made him kill me..." A weak attempt at a smile tips his lips up slightly.

The anger builds again, not as strong, but still persuasive. "Wilbur, I don't *want* to give up on you," her words are slow and forceful, "which means you at least have the *potential* to be better. I don't put my faith in lost causes. And you're *better* than giving up on yourself and becoming a lost cause."

The raging part of her wants to add more, wants to spit than he has to get his shit together and be an adult and just fucking *apologize*. Wants to spit that she'll hurt him if he doesn't act right, that she'll send him right back to whatever hell he was in before. Wants to hit him, so he knows how Tommy feels. Wants to just keep being angry and cruel, because it feels right, feels *easy*.

Instead, she takes another steady breath, sighs softly, and doesn't say more.

After a few moments, Wilbur speaks again.

"I need to change. I know I do, after last night. Either I fix my behavior, or I die again." A hollow, familiar laugh follows the statement, making Niki shiver. "I don't remember a time where I wasn't like this." He runs a hand through his hair, and the golden streak stands out sharply. "I don't know *how* to fix myself, Niki."

She leans back on the railing, staring at the ground. She wants to keep being angry, she wants to punish him, she wants to make things harder for him.

But honestly, deep inside, she doesn't want any of that. She really just wants him to be *okay*, to fix him, to fix the damage he's caused. She's better than her cruel instincts, the anger that she can draw from so easily now...

Niki takes his hand and intertwines their fingers. They're both shaking.

"You need to apologize," she repeats, squeezing his hand, without looking up. "The only way you can fix yourself and what you've done is by apologizing and trying to be better. I *know* you can do it, you're strong enough to do it, but not without *work*." Her voice comes out a little bit stronger than she expects, more intense, not quite as calm. But she's not angry.

Wilbur goes very still and quiet, and after a few moments of silence, she looks up, meeting his gaze.

He's looking at her with something like awe, by the strict definition of the word; respect or reverence mixed with dread and wonder.

It makes Niki's wings ruffle with self-confidence and her cheeks become warm, because she feels like he's seeing the sharp, intense version of her, the person she's becoming, outside of the anger, the cruelty. The woman that's stronger and better and more confident than the soft, scared girl she used to be.

Being looked at with awe, with that kind of respect... she feels like she's changing for the better.

"I can," Wilbur says, in a very small voice. "I have to."

She holds his hand tighter.

--

Sam crouches down, box of redstone in hand, and draws a line with his finger, trying to estimate how much he needs for this section.

He'll need to check his measurements for this, the signal won't last...

He sighs and wipes his brow on his sleeve.

Why is he even working so hard on this? He doesn't want to be doing this. He could be doing anything else.

Well.

No, technically, he can't do anything else.

Because he was asked to do this by the server admin, and on any other server, it would probably be safe to refuse such a big project.

But Dream isn't really the kind of man you can safely refuse. So that's why he's doing it. He values his own safety and wellbeing too much to refuse this project, even though it's so complicated...

He kneels and shakes out more redstone dust, adjusting the circuitry until it's all connected properly. It should work now, but he won't know until he checks this section later, once the whole mechanic is set up.

He's lucky that he's a patient person.

He goes to adjust a few more things, and he finds himself absorbed in his work.

Which is probably why he startles so badly when he hears sudden footsteps on the obsidian floor.

He outright jolts, hitting his knee on the comparator he was sitting beside, and he hisses through his teeth as it bruises him.

"Sorry about that," Dream's voice drawls, unapologetic.

"No, no, it's fine, I just didn't know I'd need to be wearing armor to set up the circuitry," Sam says, rubbing his knee with one of his free hands.

He crouches down to go back to his work. A parcel of silence follows, and the whole time, he can feel Dream's gaze on him, as heavy as a physical force.

Sam clears his throat. "What can I do for you, Dream?" He asks politely, glancing back at the man.

He has his masked head tilted, and his arms crossed. He's wearing armor, and his sword, hanging at his waist, is visibly bloodied, as are his sleeves.

He's not optimistic enough to think he was just hunting.

“I came around to tell you I’m going to be bringing some stuff here,” Dream says casually. “For the prisoner this whole place is intended for.”

Sam’s hands suddenly feel cold and numb, and he has to brush the redstone dust off of them to mask their shaking. He’s smart enough to not show weakness in front of this man. “Right. And that prisoner is...?”

“That’s not really relevant right now, is it?” He asks, tilting his head in the opposite direction. Sam can hear the malicious grin in his voice.

“I... I suppose it isn’t,” he says carefully. “Are there any other preparations I’ll have to make?”

“Nope, you just need to finish working on everything else. I’ve got everything under control for him.”

Sam looks back to his work, but he’s trembling too hard to put down the redstone. “Alright, that sounds good.” He sounds a bit choked.

He pretends to be busy.

For what feels like hours, he can still hear the sounds of Dream shifting in place on the obsidian, his clothes rustling. He can feel his eyes on his back.

He keeps pretending to work, mostly just moving things around, but he can’t focus on it.

Something feels wrong. Everything about Dream feels wrong, but this is different. It’s almost like...

Like he’s *excited* about something.

It’s not good that he’s excited.

--

Tubbo throws another book aside and runs both hands through his hair.

Why does he have nothing on sleeping potions?! He should have *plenty* of information, they’re a *basic fucking potion*, why are *all of his books lacking in that department*?!

“Ughhh,” he groans, now digging his palms against his eyes. “What the *fuck*.”

“Aw, someone woke up in a bad mood, huh?”

He sighs deeply, dropping his hands onto his lap. He can’t even feel annoyed. He’s just so tired... “Leave me alone, Schlatt.” He has an awful, awful migraine, between a hangover and his horns still growing. They’ve been growing for a while, but it’s been worse the last few weeks. They’re to the point that they’re starting to curl...

“Nah, I’m bored. I’m in need of some entertainment.” A cold hand brushes his shoulder, but he doesn’t have the energy to shiver. “You’re throwing your books around again.”

“How smart of you to notice,” he says flatly. “I’m looking for a sleeping potion.”

“Those are dangerous, you know. Addictive.” Schlatt’s cold hand ruffles his hair, and then the coldness retreats. “You’re still struggling to sleep, huh?”

Tubbo rolls his eyes and reaches out to grab another book from the bottom shelf of his bookcase. “Yes, I’ve never been able to sleep well... or at *all*...” he flips open the book and scans the table of contents. “Are they really addictive?” He asks.

“They are. People waste away, wanting to stay in that relaxed, sleepy state... There’s a reason most people treat potions as controlled substances, kid.”

He catches sight of a “resting draught” and flips to the appropriate page. “Sure. Well, there’s no one to really control them here except me, so....”

An illustration of a dark-blue potion in a slim, crystalline bottle takes up a quarter of the page, livening up the white-yellow paper. The handwriting is small, neat and elegant. Tubbo squints at the page; his eyesight isn’t great, and he has a hard enough time reading as it is.

He manages to find the ingredient list.

“Nether wart, warped fungus, a powder made from glowstone dust and phantom membrane... so it actually makes you sleep instead of just being unconscious, there’s a difference...” he murmurs to himself, somewhat struggling to read the words without the addition of his own voice. “Alcohol, dried lavender, mint... rosemary, salt, chamomile... honey, to taste... I think I have most of this?”

He grabs a random notebook from the shelf, along with a pen, and scribbles down the list and the quantity needed for each.

“You’re going to fuck yourself up with all of this, little guy,” Schlatt says, clearly amused. “You’re very prone to addiction.”

“I don’t care,” Tubbo says in response, hurrying to get up after adding *honey* to the list. “I need to check and see if I have everything...”

He wanders off to check his supplies. He has phantom membranes, the thin, dried tissue stored in a flat, tight box within one of his chests. He has glowstone dust, more than he expects, all kept in glass jars, wrapped in string and labeled in... not his handwriting... it kind of looks like Niki’s, maybe? Who knows.

Lavender, mint, rosemary, salt, chamomile... all of those are also in neat glass jars, lined up in a kitchen cabinet. These ones aren't labeled. He has both alcohol and honey in abundance.

Critically, though, he has no nether wart or warped fungus. He knows fungus is critical to a potion’s effectiveness, so he can’t just go without it...

He checks all of his chests and cabinets, sure he's just missing it, but all signs point to that not being the case, and instead showing one obvious conclusion:

He has to go to the Nether. *Alone.*

He's sure it's the case for most people, but he *really* doesn't like the Nether. He doesn't like heat, he doesn't like lava, and he doesn't like being chased by vicious beasts, most of which are faster than he was even at his peak of health.

But this is the best hope he's had for a good sleep in a while. The potion book said this mixture will prevent sleep paralysis, too...

With a deep sigh, he goes to get his armor and some weaponry.

"Where do you think you're going?" Schlatt asks, watching him put on his armor from where he's floating in the doorway.

Tubbo rolls his eyes a little, and adjusts his chestplate. "To the Nether, I need to get a few things." He must have lost weight or something; this chestplate fit fine just a few months ago (...? he doesn't have a great sense of time anymore, the days blur together), when they tried to kill Technoblade, but now it's loose to the point he almost can't tighten it enough...

(He knows he's lost weight. For a while, he was *gaining* weight, but he's stopped eating as much because he rarely has the energy to cook. He rarely has the energy to do anything but wallow in his own misery and loneliness...

He has Schlatt, but that's... a lot worse than being alone.)

"I don't think it's a smart idea to have you near an open flame."

He looks up and glares at the ghostly figure with contempt. "I'm really not in the mood for this," he mutters, pushing his hair from his face. He needs a haircut...

"C'mon, kid, don't be dumb."

He turns his eyes to the ground. He's tapping his foot without thinking about it. "Why do you even care? You hate me." His words come out slightly childish and whiny. If he had the energy, he'd be embarrassed; he's too old to be whining at anyone, let alone the bitter ghost of his father.

Schlatt chuckles, but he doesn't otherwise reply. He floats off to do something else, and Tubbo doesn't see him again when he leaves.

-

Tubbo lets out an embarrassing yelp-squeak sound as a fireball shrieks past him, and throws himself around a corner to avoid the one that closely follows it. He can't tell what's sending them his way; he can't hear a blaze or a ghost, but neither can be ruled out.

He really doesn't like it here.

He shakes his head dismissively; he just needs to get to the fortress. It isn't far, he can see it's towering bridge from where he is now, but the only way there is to scale a wall.

"I hate this," he mutters to himself, as he starts to climb.

He's too hot; his body holds onto heat way too much, especially his hair, which is damp and sticking to his head even without a helmet to trap the heat in. His palms are sweaty too, which is making climbing pretty difficult.

But at least he's actually good at climbing.

He grabs onto an ideal protrusion of netherrack and hauls himself over the wall, overbalancing a little and consequently falling onto his stomach on the ground.

"Ugh," he groans as he gets up, stumbling slightly. His headache has only gotten worse.

The fortress is close, though. He only has to climb another small ledge to get onto the bridge.

He feels confident for all of two seconds. He just needs to find the staircase and the beds of nether wart, and it's only a hallway or two away, right?

He's straightening out his armor and drawing his sword as a precaution when rattling issues from the room in front of him, and when he turns in that direction, startled, a wither skeleton is coming straight for him.

Tubbo yelps again, and swings his sword wildly at the approaching creature. His form is awful, and his balance isn't much better; his sword is heavier than he remembers it being and he gets dizzy so easily, he nearly falls again while in the motion of attacking.

And he doesn't even hurt the stupid skeleton. He grazes its ribs with his blade, but it just clatters angrily at him and sweeps its own sword at him in a far more elegant motion.

He stumbles back from the attack, nearly tripping over his own feet, and manages to avoid getting hurt, but only by a hair.

He immediately decides that running is safer than fighting, and takes off at a sprint, getting through the arched doorway of the nearest room and down a hallway. The skeleton only pursues him down that hallway and the one following it, but seems to give up after he goes down a flight of stairs set into the wall.

The nether wart is... this way, right? He has a map of this place somewhere, but he's stupid and didn't grab it. He doesn't even know where he put it.

He hurries down more hallways, on high alert, tense to the point of trembling as he runs.

Two more hallways. Another set of small stairs. Another bridge, this one empty of skeletons.

He... doesn't know where the nether wart is. Is he remembering a different fortress? It's possible.

He keeps searching, slowing to a jog and then a quick walk. He's in no shape to be running. The Tubbo of a few months ago would laugh at how weak he is now....

(Tommy would laugh at him, too. One of the very few things Tubbo had always been able to hold over his head, metaphorically speaking, is that he could run a lot faster.

He shuts that train of thought down because he's entirely too tired to miss his best friend right now.)

Where is it? he thinks, with no small amount of panic, as he searches. He just needs to find the room with the staircase in the center and the beds of soul sand, that's all. He doesn't even need a lot of it! Just like, *two* fully grown stems will be enough.

If he can't find it... fuck. Not only will he be out in terms of the potion, but he has to fight his way home with nothing to show for it. Well, he can get warped fungus without trouble, that's easy enough to get, that grows abundantly, but he can't make a potion without the nether wart...

He wishes he still had friends to ask for help or to borrow things from. He's so alone, all the time, and he knows it's his own fault...

He runs his free hand through his sweat-dampened hair, then rubs his temples. "Dammit," he mutters to himself. "This was supposed to be easy... I thought I knew where they were..."

He keeps walking, going down more hallways, through a room with a well of lava in the center, barely dodging fireballs sent his way by a room full of blazes. He's hot, tired, and *really fucking irritated*.

He keeps meeting dead ends, or finding bridges that are broken halfway along their length and therefore useless.

After the fifth time running into a dead end room, he groans and rubs his face. He'll look until he meets another dead end, and then he's going to cut his losses and go home. He's not in good enough shape to be doing this, and he's so fucking *tired*...

He walks at a less-than-swift pace, scanning the hallway he's in.

No staircase, no rooms, just a long hallway of dark bricks and a peek of the lava and netherrack outside through the barred windows...

He's looking at the walls, hoping beyond hope that there's a break in them into another room, totally distracted and absorbed by the task--

--and that's why he falls down the exact staircase he was looking for. He goes down pretty hard, hitting his hips and his left shoulder on the brick stairs, but he manages to avoid bashing his head in.

He lands on the floor heavily, laying on his back, struggling to catch his breath. It takes a few minutes for him to manage it.

Oh, he's gonna be feeling this for *days*, and that's the optimistic part of him talking. It might be more like weeks.

He struggles back up to his feet, his hips aching, his shoulder stiff, and grabs his bag, which fell off of his shoulder when he tumbled down the stairs.

Well, he found the nether wart, at least.

He steps onto a bed of soul sand and crouches down to pick the fungus growing there. It's all ready to be harvested, at least on this side, so he gathers up all of it, wrapping the stalks in a cloth and then putting them in his bag.

He stretches, trying to work some of the soreness out of his shoulder. It doesn't help much.

Now he just has to get the warped fungus, and take it all home, so he can make that potion and finally get some sleep.

Getting out of the fortress is easy; he avoids all of the monsters and is able to make it out a lot faster than he got in. He even takes down a wither skeleton.

He makes it to the nearest warped forest without a hitch, and picks a few of the blue and orange mushrooms, adding them to his bag. Now all he has to do is walk back to the portal, and make his way home...

He's not far from the portal when he hears it.

He freezes, even though the portal is in sight, glowing and purple. His ears twitch up as he listens hard.

It sounds like... someone *crying*? It's not a ghast's cry, it sounds like it's coming from a person, or at least something humanoid.

Frowning, he looks at the portal, and then in the direction of the crying.

Whatever is going on, it's not my business, he tries to tell himself. *I need to go home. I'm way too tired for this*.

And yet, he stays there, listening intently to the crying.

He doesn't realize he's started to walk in that direction until he's already a good ways away from his portal.

He doesn't have to walk for long. Within five minutes, he finds the source.

A baby piglin. A zombified one, actually, with half of his little face rotted away and only one eye.

He's sitting on the ground, crying, holding... a chicken? Or, more accurately, the corpse of one, which is morbid. The poor bird's neck is crooked, obviously broken, and many of its feathers are scattered on the netherrack around them.

Tubbo stares for longer than he expects, just taking in the sight. The kid looks so *tiny*, he can't be any older than maybe three or four. His heart twists in sympathy and distress at the idea of this little kid having already *died*.

Once, a million years ago, he had found a dying baby bird in the forest. It was so young that it didn't even have all of its feathers, and its chirps somehow sounded sad.

Tommy had been with him, and the sight made him very upset, understandably so. He begged for them to go home.

But Tubbo felt bad just leaving the poor thing on the ground. He waited around until it stopped breathing, and then buried it in the soft dirt under a large tree. His heart was just too soft and open back then...

Some of that open softness returns as he crouches down to be closer to the little piglin.

"Hello," he says in his kindest voice.

The kid looks up at him, a pure white eye locking on his face. He looks confused, very confused.

"Why are you on your own out here, huh?" Tubbo asks, sitting down now.

He snuffles. He's not sure if he understands him, but he doesn't seem scared, so that's good.

Tubbo looks around briefly, trying to catch sight of any other piglins, living or dead. But they're alone, nothing but a lava-fall at their left to provide noise and light.

He sighs and turns back to the child in front of him. He's stopped crying, and is just sitting curled up and sniffing instead, avoiding his gaze.

"Poor thing," Tubbo murmurs, mostly to himself. He shuffles a bit closer.

Surely he can find a safer place for the poor kid, right? It doesn't matter that he's clearly already dead, he can't fathom just leaving him out here on his own.

But there's no one around, and he doesn't know what to do... he can't *leave* him here.

Maybe he can find a safe place to put him, maybe somewhere that a more responsible creature could find him? Because he knows *he's* not a responsible creature. See: everything he's done since about age ten.

"C'mon," Tubbo says quietly, and reaches in to gently pick the kid up. "Let's find somewhere better for you."

To his surprise, he doesn't fight being picked up; instead, he latches his tiny hands on the straps of his chestplate and doesn't let go, letting out quiet happy noises as he does so.

The poor kid is clearly touch-starved. *That makes two of us*, Tubbo thinks with an internal sigh.

He'll carry him to the warped forest. That's about as safe as the Nether gets, the only dangerous creatures there are endermen, and they don't really seem to attack other monsters.

It's easy to make it back to the forest. He gently pushes some vegetation aside, and crouches to put the kid down under the canopy of one of the large fungi.

"There we go," Tubbo says, smiling. He's probably just talking for his own benefit, but that's fine. "You'll be safer if you stay here, okay?"

The little piglin looks up at him with one big, white eye, blinking slowly like a cat, not moving otherwise.

He pats him on top of his head, the pink fur there oddly soft. He says goodbye, and gets a quiet little snort in response.

He heads back in the direction of his portal. He needs to get home now, he's tired and incredibly sore-- he's going to have to ice his hips, if not his shoulder too, and he just happened to hurt the shoulder that was *already* messed up from the fireworks. (It makes a funny little clicking noise if he stretches it wrong, and he can't sleep on that side without it hurting.)

He makes his way back to the portal, getting it within his sight once more, and he's letting his thoughts drift off to what he's going to do when he gets home.

He'll eat something, brew the potion, and then he'll sleep for a *long* fucking time. Longer than usual, at the very least. His usual is a few hours every night, and sometimes a nap during the day. But he never gets much good rest, never long enough to chase away the fuzz of exhaustion...

He's less than ten feet away from the portal when he hears footsteps behind him.

He has just enough energy to go tense and walk a bit faster.

He's wearing gold, so it can't be a piglin. He'd hear anything else that lurks in this dimension. So what is it? Another person? It's not out of the question.

He may be alone in terms of *friends*, but there are plenty of enemies around the server. To be honest, he sees most people as an enemy, at this point. He keeps having his trust broken.

They're still following him. His heart is beating quickly enough that he feels a little faint. His temples are throbbing with the usual headache, and it's getting worse because he's clenching his jaw.

If he makes it through the portal, he can find somewhere to hide until it's safe to go home. Right? Right. It wouldn't be the first time he's had to hide until he's safe.

He's within arm's reach of the portal, when he chances looking back.

And- and looking *down*, as well, because it's just the baby piglin from before.

Tubbo laughs a little, embarrassed and a bit hysterical. He's not in any danger. It's just the kid.

"Why are you following me?" He asks, pausing to crouch down in front of him again. "I'm going home, buddy. I can't take you with me."

He looks up at him, very cute for being a mobile corpse, and reaches out to grab onto his chestplate again. He even makes a small sound, a happy little coo, clearly not realizing the situation.

Tubbo finds himself gently putting his arm around the kid, holding him close. He's not sure why. "You can't come with me," he says softly. "I can't take care of you. I can barely take care of *myself*."

He really isn't sure if he can understand him, because he still holds onto his chestplate in tight little fists, and he even tries to snuggle closer to him.

"You can't come with me," he insists again, reaching up to pry his tiny hands off of him. "You have to stay here..."

He whimpers, only holding tighter, tucking himself up against his chest. He's trembling, clearly upset by the idea of staying. Or maybe zombie piglins just shake, Tubbo can't be sure.

He sighs. He can't take the kid with him. He's seventeen and actively self-destructive and doesn't even know how to take care of *himself*, let alone a baby monster.

But as he tries to uncurl the kid's fingers from his chestplate, drawing more little whimpers, he just... can't push him away.

Wasn't he in a very similar situation, many years ago? He was orphaned and alone too, though he was too young at the time to remember it now. Sure, there are some distinct differences; he wasn't rotting in a way typical of his species, nor was he in *hell*, but he *was* orphaned and alone, and someone took him in.

(That *someone* is going to have a lot of things to say about this, he's sure.)

Tubbo sighs again, and wraps his arms around the kid, before standing up. "Okay, okay. We're going home," he says, somewhat tiredly, and the small piglin in his arms makes another happy sound before snuggling into his shoulder.

--

Connor dreams about screaming.

His own, certainly- but also his friends, his acquaintances, and especially Tommy.

It makes sense. He's sleeping in Tommy's bed, after all.

He rinses the blood from his mouth and starts his day.

Coffee helps scrub the exhaustion from his mind as he trundles through his morning routine. He opens the window blinds to let in the grey dawn and waters the flowers in the little planter box in the kitchen. Breakfast is some stale bread slathered in sweetberry jam, though he'll soon run out of both. He lounges in the front room and fills another page of his daily puzzle book. Today's was a maze shaped like a hot dog. He only messed up three times.

He takes a nap in the recliner chair he stole from Quackity's house last week. This sleep is blessedly dreamless, though his mouth is once again full of blood when he wakes. Maybe it's the onesie, somehow? It *has* been a while since he's washed it. He'll have to try rinsing it out at the river next time he goes for a bath, because none of the stupid houses in L'Manberg have running water except for Tubbo's and Connor isn't in the mood to get stabbed again right now. He wastes a bit more of his dwindling drinking water to wash out his mouth.

"Well, well. If it isn't my favorite business partner."

Connor spits into the sink and glances up at the specter hovering in the doorway. "Tubbo kicked you out again?"

Schlatt snorts. "Hardly! That little brat doesn't tell me what to do."

"Okay. I don't want to buy any crypto, then."

"What?"

Connor leans back against the bathroom counter. "If you're not here because Tubbo kicked you out, then you're here to sell me crypto, right?"

"No, I- Jesus, man, can I not come say hi to an old friend?"

"So there's no crypto?"

"No, there's no fuckin' crypto!"

Connor frowns and brushes past Schlatt to head for the front room. "That sucks. I've recently developed a crippling gambling addiction and I was hoping an investment could take the edge off."

Schlatt scoffs, drifting behind him. "Isn't there a casino up north of here?"

"Yeah, but I ran out of money and racked up several lifetimes of debt, so they won't let me in anymore." He settles in the armchair once more.

Schlatt leans down to pluck a stray yellow down feather from the cushion. "Maybe I can put in a good word for you with the owner."

"Oh, I already tried talking to him. One of his fiances threatened to set me on fire."

"Damn, just for talking to him?"

"Yeah. Also I stole a bunch of shit from their houses here."

“Ah.”

Schlatt sinks down to sit cross-legged on the floor and holds the feather up on his palm. He blows gently and watches it tumble away.

“Whatever. My little sugar pumpkin settled hard, so his dumb casino venture probably sucks ass.”

“Eh. It’s alright. Worked on me, anyway.”

“Yeah, well, you’re easy.”

Connor snorts. “Hey, remember that time you came to my doorstep in tears after Wilbur kicked you out and begged me to let you stay the night? I seem to recall something about a blowjob-”

“Watch it or I still might, Connor.”

He waves a hand dismissively. “I don’t want your cold dead mouth anywhere near my junk.”

“The deal’s void anyway. This isn’t your house, no matter what you wrote on the front door. You’re a squatter.”

“Yeah.”

“Wow. Damn. Not even a shred of shame.”

He shrugs. “I don’t see the point. Don’t have anywhere else to go and the server’s closed, so.”

“Wait- what?” Schlatt sits upright and his tail flops over behind him. “The server’s-?”

“Yeah, I think so. Last I checked, anyway. I was trying to evade my severe gambling debt but there’s no door, so I had to come back. I ended up squatting and stealing because they can’t come repossess my shit if I don’t own anything.”

Schlatt laughs off the consideration he’d been wearing and shakes his head. “Y’know, I was starting to worry I might be a bit of a drunk loser, so. Thanks for helping me feel better about myself.”

Connor tips back in the recliner. “Sure thing, pal.”

“I did come here for a reason, but I think it’d be funnier if I didn’t say anything, so I’m not gonna.”

“Nice.”

“See you around, Connor.”

“Later.”

Connor shuts his eyes and folds his hands over his stomach.

It's always nice when old friends come to visit.

-

Morning has given way to mid-afternoon when the front door opens again. It's near-silent and unimpeded by the lock Connor is sure he put in place before bed last night, so he's curious about who or what he'll see when he glances up from his crumbling copy of *Good Morning, Midnight*.

He's a bit surprised, he'll admit, but clearly not as surprised as his houseguest, who startles and takes a half step backward when their eyes lock.

"You're- still here."

"I live here," Connor says, idly marking his page and shutting the book.

"...Why?"

"Debt evasion."

"Who do you- actually, nevermind. I don't care."

Connor folds his hands on the table and tilts his head. "What can I do for you, Dream?"

Dream hums. He looks Connor up and down, then turns sharply away. "Nothing. I'm just here to pick some stuff up, and then I'll be on my way."

Connor rises. "What stuff? I've been here long enough to have squatter rights, so anything on the property is technically mine."

"You won't miss it-"

"I might."

Dream exhales sharply and drops a hand to the handle of the knife on his belt. "Am I going to have to take it by force?"

Connor tracks the tapping of his fingers against the grip and shrugs. "Depends on what you're after."

Dream stares him down a moment longer, then shakes his head and laughs under his breath. "You're... Not afraid of me at *all*, are you."

It's not a question, but Connor shakes his head anyway. "You're not very scary."

Dream strides across the room directly toward Connor, backing him into the wall and bracketing him with an arm on either side of his head.

He leans down into Connor's space and growls, "I could skin you. I could cut you open and leave you here tied up with the door wide open. I could break your arms and legs and use you like a pretty little doll, baby blue."

"I mean, I'd prefer if you didn't."

Dream slots a hand over Connor's throat and stares at him from behind the cold shadow of the mask. This close, the scent of gunpowder and iron is overwhelming. Connor wonders idly if Dream would have any insight about why he always wakes up with blood in his mouth.

"You are a fucking *anomaly*," Dream mutters. He releases Connor and steps back, straightening out his jacket.

"I get that a lot."

Dream starts opening cabinets in the kitchen and rifling through them.

"What are you looking for?"

"...A book. Probably bound in leather. It would have drawings inside."

"Oh, the sketchbook? I threw that out when I moved in."

Dream tips his head back and groans. "*Why?*"

Connor shrugs. "I didn't need it. Worldly possessions really weigh you down, if you think about it."

"Where did you throw it away?"

"Lava."

"*What?*"

"Lava," Connor repeats. "Landfills kill the environment, dude."

"Oh my *god*, you are so fucking infuriating," Dream mutters. "I'm gonna search the house in case you missed one, and you're gonna let me, and then I'm gonna leave."

Connor shrugs. "Alright."

So he follows Dream around while he tears the house apart.

"Okay, so, like- I'm kind of in a tight spot financially, and I know you're, uh- well off. Since you're kind of the big boss around here."

Dream ignores him in favor of pulling drawers out of the cabinetry and dumping their contents on the floor.

Connor takes that as a signal to continue. "Now, I know you're probably thinking, *oh, this guy isn't smart with his money*. But that's not the case. I was at the helm of one of the most

successful crypto mints to ever exist; the only reason I'm in this situation is because I was in the wrong place at the wrong time."

Dream growls at the growing pile of random garbage on the kitchen floor and kicks one of the cabinet doors in rather than opening it. He ends up having to clear the splintered wood out of the way to get at the contents, but Connor manages to keep it professional and refrains from commenting.

"All I need is a bit of seed capital and I'm good. I can guarantee you'll see quintuple your investment at a turnaround time that would make *Sonic* blush. Really, this is a no-risk venture for you; I just need enough cash to get the casinos off of my tail, and then I can move with my big startup. It's gonna revolutionize the market, man, I'm telling you."

Dream moves on to the main room and continues his process of methodically removing and emptying shelves, drawers, and chests.

"So I'm just gonna put you down for investing 300 diamonds."

Dream pauses to give Connor an inscrutable look through the mask. "What?"

"My sales pitch won you over," he explains. "I can get you on a payment plan if you don't have everything right now. I'd move fast, though; the banks running those loans are pushing some gnarly interest rates. A buddy of mine ended up dealing with 14%, compounded monthly. He was killed by debt collectors. Not the same ones charging that interest rate, though- these guys were unrelated and they accidentally ran him over with one of their horses."

"I'm not giving you any diamonds."

"Yeah, exactly. You get it. It won't be like you're *giving* me anything, because you'll see a return on your investment before you can even miss them."

Dream scoffs and reaches under his mask to rub his eye, then draws the axe from his back.

Connor tilts his head. "I can't accept diamonds that're already forged-"

Dream smashes it down into the floor. The wood panels explode under its cleaving weight and shower the air with splinters. When Dream heaves the axe back out, there's a long gash with webbed cracks extending out along the neighboring planks.

Dream kneels down beside it, grabs the edge of the board, and rips it clear out of the floor, heedless of the nails screaming and squealing as he does so. He repeats this process with a few of the adjacent boards until a small crawlspace under the floor is revealed.

Inside are two double chests. Dream hops down and forces the rusted hinges to pop the first chest open and

holy fucking shit

it's full of money.

Like, “*retire in Fiji*” money. “*Buy three houses and a boat*” money. “*Hire a bunch of deep web hitmen and daisy chain contracts between them until they’re fighting a battle royale for your entertainment*” money.

“*Pay off his gambling debts and leave him plenty to have his moment at the slots*” money.

“That’s mine,” Connor blurts. “I have squatter rights. I own that.”

Dream shuts the chest and turns to lean back against it with his legs casually crossed. He clicks his tongue. “What are you willing to do for it, baby blue?”

“It’s already mine.”

“Maybe. That won’t stop me from taking it and throwing it all in the lava, though.”

Connor blanches. “What, you’re not even gonna *spend* it? Come on.”

“Landfills kill the environment.”

He bites his inner cheek, wincing a bit at how sore and tender it already is. “Well... What do you want for it?”

“I’m willing to take a small finder’s fee in exchange for all of this,” Dream says. “I don’t even want any of the money. There’s something else you can do for me.”

Connor clears his throat and nods. It *has* been a while. Dream isn’t really the choice he would have gone with out of everyone here, but he supposes he could do a lot worse.

“I want you to go to Kinoko and help me, ah... *Prank* George.”

Connor drops the hand twitching toward his onesie zipper back to his side. “Oh. I’m banned from Kinoko. Can’t help you.”

“What? Why?”

“Because I’m banned,” Connor repeats. “Means I can’t come into the country-”

“No, you little- how did you get banned?”

“I showed up to ask Quackity to make his people lift my casino ban and Karl and Sapnap threatened me. Well, I mean- Sapnap threatened me. Karl just kinda laughed at me, probably because I was wearing Sapnap’s sneakers and a bunch of Karl’s jewelry. In my defense, they did leave it lying around for anyone to take-”

“So you won’t go to Kinoko?”

“Nah. He threatened to ‘*burn my throat shut so I can’t swallow or breathe,*’ whatever that means. And I’m not trying to get my throat burned shut.”

Dream stands and leaps out of the crawlspace, landing neatly in front of Connor and immediately seizing him by the neck. He leans in close and growls, “What if I told you that *I* would burn your throat shut if you *don’t* go?”

Connor considers for a moment. “If you do it, I don’t have to walk to Kinoko first, so I’ll go with that one.”

“Oh my fucking *god*. No wonder you’re alone.”

Dream releases Connor and stalks toward the bedroom. Connor waits until he hears Dream tearing the dresser apart, then grabs the duffel bag from behind the couch, drops into the crawlspace, and starts frantically shoveling money into it.

By the time Dream returns, he has almost the entire chest emptied and crammed into the bag. Dream spares him a glance, sighs, and moves on to cut the couch open with his axe and root around inside, as if Tommy would have somehow hidden his sketchbooks in the cushions. When that yields no results, Dream stalks toward the front door.

“I’ll let you know if I find it,” Connor calls.

Dream pauses and glances back at him. “Why?”

“I dunno. Us humans gotta stick together, right?”

Dream remains still and quiet for a long moment, then shakes his head slightly and pushes the door open. “Right.”

He leaves without another word.

Connor spends an hour counting the money to make sure he isn’t doing the math wrong. There’s enough here to repay his debt in full and then some, which he has every intention of using to gamble for more.

It feels a bit weird to take this much for nothing, though.

So he climbs up into the rafters of the main room and retrieves the sketchbook from the small wooden box tucked into a corner where two of the struts meet. It’s a wonder Dream didn’t think to look up considering this house belongs to an avian, but Connor’s not complaining. He left this thing alone after he found it and he didn’t ever intend on interacting with it again—but knowing Dream wants it gives it value, and he can cash that in.

Connor hops carefully back down onto the dining table, puts the money and the box into the duffel, and heads for Las Nevadas.

He needs to pay Quackity a visit.

--

George wakes up to an unfamiliar noise. He’s not sure what it is, his ears perking up before he’s even awake enough to open his eyes.

There's definitely an unusual sound.

He blinks his eyes open, slower than usual, genuinely too tired to be as alert as he should be. The room is dark, with only a thin trace of dawn light coming through the slit in his curtains.

No one else is in his room. But the sound wasn't coming from his room.

He sits up and looks around, dragging his eyes over every shadow. One of his hands goes out to grab his knife from the bedside table, the polished iron scraping lightly on the wood as he pulls it closer.

It could have been nothing. It may well have been *nothing*.

But...

Hesitant, George slips out of bed. Usually, he'd step into his slippers, because the floor always feels cold, but this time, he stays barefoot.

He holds his knife protectively as he creeps around his room. He checks behind the curtains and under the bed and in the closet. No one is there.

No one but him. He's alone.

He bites his lip as he walks out of his room, and slowly checks every room. Every one is empty.

No one is there except him.

Maybe I didn't hear anything. Maybe it was just my imagination. Maybe I was just dreaming.

He huffs a joyless laugh, leaning on the kitchen counter now. He rubs his eyes with his fist. It's too early to be awake, he needs to go back to bed. It's only six-thirty... if he can go back to sleep, he can maybe get a few more hours until something else wakes him up...

He drops his hand, the light coming in the kitchen windows dazzling him for a second, and that's when he sees it.

Flowers, laying on the table, tied together with a white ribbon. Blue orchids, this time.

He stares at them, wide-eyed and panicked, until it clicks in his head.

He needs to hide. Now.

He trips twice while running for his room, and ends up hitting his knee on the stairs. The pain barely registers.

He slams the door behind himself, throws open the closet door, and grabs his communicator from the nightstand.

No one is in his room, nothing is wrong yet, he just needs to hide for a bit, everything is *fine*-

-

Dream is outside the window. He can't see him clearly, but he can see the blur of his clothes and his mask and a blob of bright blue in one raised hand.

George slams the closet door closed and hides in the corner, hugging his knees and trying to force himself to calm down. At least enough to talk coherently, and not burst into tears the minute he speaks.

He's not going to get me again. He won't risk it. Last time was bad enough. He won't try to get me again. He doesn't want to risk it again. I don't want him to either. I really don't...

He swallows hard, his throat aching with the scream he's holding back. It's fine. It's *fine*. He just needs to have someone else here, someone who can tell him what's real and what's just in his head.

Dream might not even actually be there. Maybe he imagined the flowers, too.

That's more optimistic than he can afford. He *knows* the flowers are real. They've shown up too many times to be a hallucination, and the others have seen them.

He fumbles with his communicator, and scrambles to put Sapnap's number in. He hugs himself tighter and listens to the dial-tone. "Answer it, come on," he mumbles.

It rings for what seems like forever. It's probably only a minute or two, at most, but it feels like *days*.

Finally, the call connects.

"Sapnap?" George gasps, holding his comm closer.

"Mm, no, it's Quackity. Sapnap was up late, he's still out cold." He can hear footsteps from the other end of the call, on wooden floors. "What's wrong?"

He's holding himself tight enough that his body aches. "Dream left me flowers again," he whispers. "A-and I saw- *I saw him outside.*"

"Shit. Are you okay? Did he hurt you?" God, he could cry at the fierce concern and alarm in Quackity's voice.

"Uh, n-no, he was just... outside my window, and he left flowers in the kitchen again." George's breathing is uneven, and he's trying *very* hard not to panic. (This is the *fifth* time he's found flowers in the kitchen. They're always different kinds, too.) "Can you come over and- um, help me make sure everything's still secure?"

"Sure," his friend says, and some of his fear drains away immediately. He didn't even realize he was worried he would refuse. "I'm already dressed and everything, I have to get going soon. I'll be over in a few minutes, okay?"

He agrees, and they hang up. He spends the next few minutes staring into the darkness, running through a breathing exercise, like he's done a million times before. The closet is warm and stuffy, but it's safe, so he's staying right here for now.

After what can't be more than five minutes, he hears the knock on the front door. He doesn't get up, and Quackity lets himself in. He can tell it's Quackity, and not Dream, by the lightness of his steps.

He walks to the closet door, and knocks lightly. "Hey," he says through the wood. "Are you in here?"

George finds himself laughing weakly. "Yeah," he replies, dragging himself up and opening the door with only a little hesitation.

Quackity is already dressed in traveling clothes, hair swept up under his beanie, his shirt properly buttoned, and he's even wearing a tie. In the dim light, his blinded eye and his scar look particularly dramatic and stark.

They search every hiding place in the house and outside, everywhere that someone could hide. George clings to his knife, and Quackity has an axe in hand, bouncing lightly, ready to attack if necessary.

But nothing is there. Not Dream, not anyone. There are more flowers on the front step, but nothing else.

That's it. Just flowers.

After they search everything twice, they go back to the kitchen. George throws the flowers into the trash, and Quackity makes breakfast and coffee without being asked.

"Thanks," he says, without looking up from his plate. His stomach hurts and he doesn't *want* to eat, but he knows he needs to. Both for his health, and his strength.

"Of course," Quackity says, sitting down next to him. He bumps his knee under the table with his own, and they eat in silence for a little while.

"Why do you think he's just leaving me flowers?" George asks, pushing his scrambled eggs around on his plate. He takes a bite, but they just taste salty and feel unpleasant in his mouth.

"Probably because he knows he can't do anything else to you," Quackity replies, taking a bite of his toast. He doesn't have any eggs on his plate; he doesn't eat them, for obvious reasons. "After last time, I mean. He got pretty fucked up." His voice is soft with fondness, and if George was in a slightly better mood, he'd roll his eyes. "He just wants to mess with your head however he can."

He looks over at the single orchid petal sitting on the table. It's blue, pristine, but otherwise unremarkable.

Other than the fact that he doesn't even know where on the server you can find blue orchids. They're rare. He doesn't even remember ever seeing them here.

So, Dream went out of his way to find rare flowers for him, and then went even *further* out of his way by sneaking into his house and leaving them on his kitchen table.

It feels like some kind of insult.

He turns back to his plate, and forces himself to finish the food.

Quackity is clearly still tired, and unusually quiet as a result (though he's been quieter since he died, since he respawned in bed with his face torn open, unable to speak for a good week...) but he nudges his hand with his own and briefly intertwines their fingers, holding tight to comfort him.

They finish breakfast. George does the dishes, out of a need to do *something* with his hands.

"Other than you, only the three of us have a key to your house, right?" Quackity asks somewhat abruptly, leaning on the counter next to the sink.

"...Yes," George says slowly, rinsing off a plate. "Why do you ask?"

"The door was still locked when I came over."

He freezes.

"But-- obviously he was *here*." His hands are suddenly shaking so hard that he has a difficult time picking up the silverware they used. "You *saw* the flowers, Quackity, I'm not *lying*--"

"I'm not saying you are!" He waves his hands illustratively. George tries hard not to flinch. "I'm saying that maybe- maybe he took one of our keys, or something. I'm just trying to think of how he got in without a key."

"He knows how to pick locks." He shuts off the sink harshly and turns to dry his hands. The trembling is only getting worse. "I told you to keep those keys in a safe place, where he couldn't find them. So how could he have *stolen* them?" There's a bitter, distrustful edge to his voice.

"I don't..." he sighs and rubs the back of his neck. "I don't know, George. Like I said, I'm trying to make it make sense. Wouldn't you have heard it, if he was picking the lock? Even if you were asleep, it makes a lot of noise. And your hearing is pretty great..."

He puts his towel down and grips the edge of the counter. He's shaking, and his chest hurts with the panic he's trying to fight. "Maybe he found a way to make a key for himself. Or maybe he knows how to teleport. It wouldn't surprise me, at this point!" The bitterness isn't just an edge anymore, or if it is, it's more of the edge of a blade than just his words. "I don't have a clue what his powers actually *are*!"

He goes to the table and sinks down into a chair again, because his legs feel weak. After a moment, Quackity joins him, taking his hand and intertwining their fingers.

George rests his face against his free hand, and stares at the table. "I'm sorry I snapped at you," he says quietly. "I didn't mean to."

Quackity squeezes his hand. He's holding his left, and he can feel his rings, pressing against his own skin. He's the only one who wears his rings as intended; Sapnap and Karl both wear theirs on necklaces.

"It's okay, don't worry about it. You've had a rough morning, I'd be more concerned if you *weren't* feeling a bit upset." He shifts in closer, not forcing him to look up, but getting close enough he can feel his presence. "He's not ever going to hurt you again, okay? I'll kill him myself if it comes to that."

He smiles just a little, but it trembles and he gives up on it pretty fast. He doesn't want anyone to have to fight Dream just so he'll be safe. They've already had to protect him...

Guilt climbs up his throat, and he has to fight not to get upset again.

They wouldn't protect him if they didn't want to, right? They're his *friends*. They care about him.

*No, they don't. They don't really care about you. They keep you around because you're pretty, and sometimes that's **barely** enough.*

That sounds a bit too much like Dream.

George exhales shakily. He leans over to rest his head on Quackity's shoulder, and after a moment's hesitation, brings his arms up to hug him as well.

It took him a long time to not panic about being touched, after everything he went through with Dream. It took even longer for him to *want* to be touched.

Even now, there are about four people who are allowed to touch him without his immediate response being to claw them to shreds.

Lucky for him, Quackity is one of those people, so he doesn't have to attack when he wraps him up in a hug, even his wings draping around him, as well as they can. They're soft and fluffy.

"Do you want to come with me?" He asks, raising a hand to gently ruffle George's hair. "They need me in Las Nevadas for the next little while, but you can come with me, if you want."

George considers it for a moment, but the hailstorm of anxiety that comes with straying too far from home wins out, as usual. "Not this time," he says, with typical weariness. "I think I'm just going to try and sleep some more."

"Good plan," Quackity agrees, giving him a gentle squeeze before pulling away. "You deserve some more rest, I think. If anyone does, it's you."

He's being very sincere, and George is happy to find that he believes it enough that it makes him smile.

--

“Dammit,” Purpled mumbles, pushing himself up on an elbow. The floor of the forest is damp and cool, the moss is wet enough that it stings his skin, and there’s dirt on his hoodie. *And* he scraped his knee, the one available through his ripped jeans. Ugh.

“Are you okay?” Charlie asks immediately, sitting on his knees next to him and looking utterly unruffled. His glasses aren’t even off-center.

“Yeah,” he says, pulling his body into a sitting position. “Well, we managed to go a few feet.” He peeks at his scraped knee. It’s not too bad, he gets worse from running into furniture. It still stings, though.

“That’s progress!” Charlie has already gotten to his feet again, and is bouncing happily on his toes. “And you’re not bleeding yet! So we can try again, right?”

Purpled shrugs. “Yeah, we probably can.” He stands up and stretches, letting out a long sigh as he does so. His muscles feel tense. “Is it affecting you at all?”

“Nope! I feel perfectly fine.”

“Of course you do...” He gives his head a firm shake. He has a headache, one of the awful ones that’s a sign of pushing too hard with magic, but today has been going pretty well. He can keep going. And tonight is a full moon, so they’ll have to take advantage of that, too...

He runs a hand through his hair, before nodding to himself. “Let’s try one more time.”

no use getting angry at the way that you're wired

Chapter Notes

so. things have been. interesting.

of course, the big thing that happened is technoblade's untimely passing. the grief was,, a lot, and i'm still not better, honestly. i miss him a lot, its kind of insane how losing someone you don't know personally can feel like losing a close friend. y'know, little bit of a parasocial moment but it's true.

i feel like it would be disrespectful to his memory to just. stop making things related to his character, because he loved fan content!!

honestly, writing snow au stuff has been pretty cathartic for all of my problems? so just leaving it unfinished would be lame of me too. ive been working on this for like a year and a half!!

so! the story is still in action. things are slow going because not only am i kind of still reeling from what happened, my physical health ain't great! i am ouchy all the time and never have enough energy. but things are still in action!!! they will not cease until this is done, lads. i have so many plans and i won't stop until they've become real!

also it's my birthday as of writing this line (aug 7th) pogchamp. i'm 20 now! i'm old.

also x2: this is the last chapter of this fic! i have the first two chapters of the next fic in the series underway, and it's gonna be a big complicated mess, even more so than this one, so i'm excited. i hope you've enjoyed the (very slow lol) ride so far! thanks to everyone who's left comments and kudos and such, it means so so much to me <3 the end of this chapter (the real!dream section) was mostly written by my co-writer/official king deathsquiggles! i was so stuck on it and she managed to fix it up within a night. king shit, everyone say thank you

warning for past abuse (and resulting trauma), references to things like depression/self harm/alcohol/smoking, minor violence, and general Rough Times. not much more than usual tbh!

title from guiltless by dodie

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Wilbur wishes he could smoke.

He's constantly jittery beyond belief, fidgeting with his clothes, drumming on any available surface with his fingers, always doing something with his hands.

He wishes he could smoke or play guitar or write anything coherent or bite his wrists raw. He's been able to resist the urge, but it's getting close.

It's been a few days since the night he was kicked out. And nothing has really... *happened*, yet. He's still trying to figure out how to go about his apologies without making it worse.

No one is doing too well, least of all him. Techno's every movement is stiff with anger and tension that's close to boiling over; Phil looks exhausted, and distinctly like he's been crying often; Ranboo has somehow become more jumpy; even Niki's gentleness with Wilbur has worn quite thin.

And *Tommy* ...

He doesn't *know* how Tommy is doing, because he barely sees him. He spends most of his time in his room or outside, and he's very rarely alone; Ranboo is always at his side, and if he's not, Techno is, all protectiveness and concern.

(He accidentally learns part of why Tommy isn't alone one night.

He catches a snippet of conversation between Techno and Ranboo, only a few sentences...

"Has he still been tryin' to hurt himself, that you've noticed?"

"No, I don't think so... he still wants to, but he doesn't have any way to do it. I don't even leave my good pens where he can get to them... they're kind of sharp..."

"That's smart of you."

"Mhm..."

Wilbur lays on his side in bed, watching the fire flicker on the wall, running his fingers over the horizontal scars on his hip.)

He's aware of the tension between all of them. He knew about it before, of course, but he wasn't looking at it the right way.

It's not that they hate him. It's that they're *scared* of him.

He supposes it makes sense. He's done a lot more harm than good. It still makes him feel a little sick, when he thinks about it.

(He ran away from home three times before he decided to stay gone. He was barely eleven.)

(The first time he ran away, he was six.

He had to go back after two days. He couldn't fend for himself.)

(His reunion with his parents and older sister wasn't pretty in the slightest. He still has a scar down his forearm from being shoved into a table.)

(The second time, he was eight, and it was a short time after his father shoved him down the stairs and he got an awful concussion. He was so confused and scared and had no idea what was going on, but he just needed to be out of that house.

He didn't make it very far. His sister found him within a few hours, and bodily carried him home. It wasn't hard.)

(The third time was his tenth birthday.

His mother had chased him down and- and was *not* gentle, in dragging him back. He doesn't remember that day very much.)

Wilbur writes down various apologies in his notebook, from the sincere to the desperate.

I know I've done wrong. I know I've hurt you, I know I've hurt all of you. But I want you to know I'm sorry for what I did. I regret it, I want to be forgiven...

Please forgive me, I'm sorry, please you have to forgive me, I don't know what you'll do if you don't

I don't deserve your forgiveness but I want it anyway.

I'm sorry. Do you remember when you were nine years old and I carried you home from the lake because you twisted your ankle? Do you remember when you were seven years old and slept in my bed for ages after reading that book about phantoms? Do you remember when you were thirteen years old and I risked your life over and over again for my own goals? Do you remember when you were five years old and you held my hand for the first time?

I'm sorry. Do you remember when you were thirteen years old and spent a whole night ranting to me about your best friend getting a boyfriend because you knew I'd understand? Do you remember when you were nineteen years old and met my son for the first time? Do you remember when you were twenty-one years old and told me you wanted me to freeze to death? (Of course you do, that was days ago.) Do you remember when you were nine years old and sat on our bedroom floor with me and told me about all the little trinkets and things you kept in the bedside table?

I'm sorry. Do you remember when I was sixteen years old and came home from a bad date and you had to patch up my split lip? Do you remember when I was eleven years old and you found me stealing food from your kitchen? Do you remember when I was fourteen years old and stayed out too late for the first time and you stayed awake to wait for me and nearly crushed me in a hug when I got home? Do you remember when I was twenty-five years old and you killed me?

Do you remember when we all piled into your nest, all four of us, because it was too cold to sleep separately? Do you remember how Tommy curled up between us, hugging me, his little wings folded up against his back? Do you remember how Techno hid under your wing to stay warm, his hand holding onto your shirt? Do you remember how I held your hand all night, even though our fingers got cold?

Do you remember? I'm sorry. I don't know how to say how sorry I am.

Attributes of a good apology:

- No guilt inducing language*
- Acknowledge what you've done wrong*
- Say sorry! With your voice and words!*
- Don't cry, it makes them feel guilty*
- Be honest?*
- ???*

It's not a very productive exercise, honestly. He crosses out so many failed apologies, because none of them are good enough. They have to be perfect, but he can't get it right.

He's supposed to be good with words. But he's *not* .

He can't remember the last time he gave a sincere apology. Years ago, at this point.

(An apology he *can* remember is one early morning, at sixteen years old, when he came home drunk and in shambles, the result of a *really* bad night out.

Everyone was awake. Tommy was starting to doze off, because he was still young and it was far earlier than he usually got up, but Phil and Techno were both wide awake and clearly worried.

Wilbur had taken his jacket off and hung it up, kicking his shoes off as well. "Why're you two up so early?" he asked, his voice rough from the previous night's activities.

He was startled by the clear fear in Techno's expression, and how his voice went high when he shouted "You were gone all night!"

Tommy jolted back into awakesness, looking around through bleary, sleepy eyes, and Techno went red up to his ears, embarrassed, and covered his mouth.

"We didn't sleep last night, because we were so worried about you." Phil said, disapproval in his tone, though it was tempered by fear as well. "It's not safe out there for you. Especially when we don't know where you are..."

Guilt trickled into Wilbur's body like ice water, making him frown and shake his head. He was tired, and that didn't help. "I didn't think you would worry that much."

He had never seen such anger on his father's face.

"Of course I would worry that much! Do you think I don't know how much danger all of us could be in because we're not human?" He was shouting, and as he did, he stood up from the couch.

Tommy promptly crawled over to climb on Techno's lap, and in response, Techno wrapped his arms around him, cautious fear flickering to life like a flame on his face.

For his part, a wave of tired acceptance washed over Wilbur. *This is familiar*, he thought, staring at how Phil's wings had extended slightly and his hands were half-curved into fists.

He exhaled slowly and tried to quell his fight or flight response.

*Phil isn't going to hurt me. He's never hurt me before. He's mad, but he's **not** going to hurt me. It's okay.*

He watched as Phil ran his hand through his hair.

He didn't flinch. He didn't. *He's not going to hurt me. He's **NOT**. Not in front of Techno and Tommy, at least.*

"Wil, I was so *scared* when you weren't back by the time we were getting ready for bed," his voice had softened significantly. "I *know* you're getting older, and I *want* to let you have more independence. But it's just... it's not *safe* to be out late. Not at night, especially if you're young or tired or *drunk*..."

Wilbur's cheeks burned with shame. He supposed it was pretty obvious he'd been drinking.

His throat was almost too tight to speak. "I'm sorry," he said, weak. "I'm really sorry. I wasn't thinking." *Please don't hit me. Please don't make my mind right about this. Please.*

To his surprise, Phil's expression almost immediately lost its anger. He sighed softly, and came over to his side, close enough to touch. "Is it alright if I hug you?"

Wilbur tried hard not to flinch when he spread his arms for the embrace. "Y-yeah, that's okay."

The hug was nice. Warm. The scent of azaleas wrapped around him just as securely as his father's arms did.

"I'm sorry I raised my voice at you," Phil said, private and low. His face was tucked against his shoulder, because Wilbur had gotten taller than him by then. "I know it scares you when people yell. I was worried, but that's no excuse. I'm sorry."

The honesty and willingness to admit to have hurt him was... odd, to say the least.

"It's okay," Wilbur said, somewhat cautious. "I'm sorry for scaring you, too. I won't do it again.")

(That ended up being a lie, but in the moment, he *did* mean it.)

-

You have to apologize to him, Wilbur thinks, looking into his own eyes in the bathroom mirror. *Tommy's the one you've hurt the most. Apologize to him.*

He runs a hand through his hair, and then nods firmly at himself. He looks grim but determined. He tries to smile, but it looks uncanny, so he drops it.

He walks out of the bathroom. They're mostly just relaxing this afternoon; Niki and Techno are... making bread, he's pretty sure, over at her house, and Phil is sitting on the couch reading, though he kind of looks like he's going to fall asleep. (He needs it. He tries to stay quiet.)

And Tommy and Ranboo are on the porch, talking quietly.

Wilbur pulls on his boots, and opens the door to step outside.

Tommy and Ranboo are sitting on the cobblestone of the porch, leaning against the wall across from the door. Ranboo has one leg raised up with his folded arms on top of it, and he's listening intently to whatever Tommy is saying, his head tilted to rest on his arms.

Tommy is waving his hands to illustrate some point, and Wilbur can pinpoint the moment he notices him, because his hands freeze completely, even his wiggling fingers going stiff. His eyes widen, and he doesn't say anything else.

Ranboo also goes quiet. Unsurprisingly, he shifts closer to Tommy and wraps his arm around him, his tail quickly following. His eyes, mismatched between a bright green and a faded-out grey, narrow suspiciously as he looks up at him, and he's faintly growling.

He's very protective, he's noticed. He wonders if that's just an innate trait of hostile mob hybrids. Every one he's ever met seemed like they were willing to kill for those they love.

Wilbur clears his throat slightly, and rubs the back of his neck. "Tommy, can I talk to you? Alone, please?"

Tommy chirps, one of those small, scared avian noises that just makes him feel worse. He's practically memorized Tommy's scared noises, he's heard them so many times.

Ranboo holds him closer, reaching in to gently take one of his hands and intertwine their fingers. "I'm staying right here," he says firmly. "If you want to tell him something, you can say it in front of me."

Wilbur lets out a small sigh and nods in agreement. He moves to sit down as well; his apology will go over a lot worse if he's towering over him.

He sits across from them, fidgeting with the soft cuff of his sweater sleeve. His words are caught in his throat like they're a physical force. They don't want to leave his mouth, it feels like he's never said *any* of this before.

It shouldn't be so hard. It *shouldn't*. Apologizing to the kid he's hurt shouldn't be so difficult.

He clears his throat again. "Right, okay. I... I wanted to apologize to you, Tommy, for what I've done. Not just for what I did the other night, but... in general."

"Right," Tommy says, his voice flat and small. He doesn't sound like himself, at all. Then again, what does he even sound like, nowadays?

He nods, trying to make himself as open and gentle as possible, like the person Tommy met all those years ago. He doesn't know if it works.

"I'm sorry," he says, honest. "I know I hurt you, and I'm sorry."

Ranboo lets out a small growl, louder than before, and his tail flicks against Tommy's side. His hands are half curled into fists, his claws obvious below the shadow of his body.

Tommy's negative reaction happens a second or two later; he frowns and looks away, crossing his arms over his chest, drawing his legs up slightly.

"I..." his voice is colored with what isn't quite fear but definitely isn't reassurance. "I... really don't know if I-I believe you."

Wilbur frowns. He fidgets with his hands on his lap, feeling like a nervous child. "That's, ah... that's alright, I can't force you to believe me. But I'm being honest, Tommy."

Ranboo places his hand on the knife hanging from his belt. He's not even sure if it's a conscious action. Either way, it makes his heart hurt.

If there was ever a chance of him gaining the trust of either of them... he's thrown it aside long before now.

"You've told me you were being honest b-before just lying to my face more than once," Tommy points out, small and nervous. "You hurt me a lot. And I don't..." He pulls his legs to his chest and wraps his arms around them. "I just don't believe you."

Wilbur's heart is in his throat. His eyes are hot with his tears, but he has to fight them; it'll make him guilty.

He thought he would get this kind of response. It doesn't mean he wanted it. But he had guessed he would.

"Like I said," he forces a small, hopefully comforting smile. "You don't have to believe me. I just wanted to let you know that I'm sorry."

Tommy snuffles. He looks like he's on the verge of tears. "I... thank you. For apologizing to me." His breathing is too fast.

He nods. His smile trembles as he gets up. He's made his statement, he can't force him to listen.

Tommy flinches hard as he stands, and hides his face in Ranboo's shoulder. He's shaking violently, even his feathers trembling.

Wilbur pushes the tears back with more force. He can't cry, at least not until he gets inside. "Tommy?" He doesn't wait until he looks up to speak. "I'm not going to hurt you again. I promise."

Ranboo begins growling again, lower, inhuman in a way that makes his head hurt and his feathers ruffle out.

(Tommy doesn't seem afraid, though. He almost seems to curl closer.)

"Leave us alone," Ranboo says. "You've said enough." It's the most confident he's heard him.

He heeds the warning in his voice.

-

Tommy feels sick to his stomach. He feels scared and small.

He feels like all the progress he's made has been unraveled carelessly, like thread, and now he feels like the exact same person he was when he escaped exile. The same scared kid who wandered uselessly through snow for ages, freezing, dying...

Panic fills him, adrenaline replacing his blood. He's trembling.

He needs to get out of here. It's never good when Wilbur gets so sincere and kind. It's manipulation.

Wilbur has manipulated him before, and he's capable of doing it again. The sincere apology was a trick. He'll let his guard down, and then... then...

(The night before he died, Wilbur came to him and talked to him about what had happened before. The wars and their country and... and everything.

Tommy was in a daze for a lot of that, to be honest. He remembers, but focusing too hard on the details hurts.

He knows Wilbur scared him, though. Knows he got angry for no real reason, throwing things, slamming doors, getting into loud arguments with anyone who spoke to him in the wrong tone...

But next to him on that night, Wilbur just looked like... a man. A man with tired eyes and ruffled up feathers behind his ears and no wings. His cane was leaning against the edge of the bed next to him, because he needed it to even walk a few feet.

"I wanted to tell you that I'm sorry for how I've behaved," Wilbur said, playing with his own fingers. "I know I scared you, and probably hurt you, too. I'm honestly sorry."

Tommy had been eager to accept that apology, after the hazy nightmare that the last months-- years, really-- had been.

He grabbed his big brother's hand, nodded hard, and told him he was forgiven.

And then he blew up their country, and died by their father's hand.

Can he even be blamed, for not believing him this time?)

He needs to focus. He needs to calm down, because his head hurts from hyperventilating and his throat is sore from whining like a kicked puppy.

His hands come up to clutch the back of his neck, as he curls up with his head between his knees.

Breathe, breathe. Freaking out isn't going to help. Deep breath.

The reminder doesn't help.

I'm not going to hurt you again. I promise.

He curls up further, wings curving around his body.

I know it hurts. But I had to do it. For your safety, y'know? I have to keep you safe.

Is that Wilbur? Or was it Dream? Both? He doesn't remember.

It just hurts.

"Tommy?"

He whines and shakes his head, as much as he can in his position. *Go away*, he wants to scream.

A hand touches his back, long and slender, and he flinches hard.

"Tommy, I'm not gonna hurt you. It's just me, okay? It's just Ranboo."

He's not being touched now. That's... better. Much better.

It's just Ranboo. Ranboo won't hurt me. He's never hurt me. I trust him with everything about me. My wings, even. Ranboo isn't like them, he won't hurt me.

"Take a deep breath, okay? You're gonna make yourself sick." On instinct and memory, Tommy draws in a deep, shaky breath. Ranboo chirps approvingly. "Can I touch you?"

He shakes his head. "Please don't," he croaks out through a tight throat. "Just sit there."

"Okay, okay. I'm right here, I'm not going anywhere."

The promise rings true. Ranboo hasn't *ever* lied to him. Has never tried to manipulate him when he was scared and alone and hurting—

Tommy digs his fingers into the back of his neck. "I'm not there anymore," he says desperately, not sure *where* exactly he means. "I'm safe. I'm *safe* here."

It's hollow. He's not safe. Wilbur hit him just days ago. Dream can still get to him. He's not safe.

Not safe not safe not safe...

“Tommy, you’re safe,” Ranboo says softly. He can hear an odd thumping sound that might be his tail hitting the porch. Or maybe it’s his own heartbeat. Difficult to tell. “No one can hurt you here. I’d protect you if anyone tried, okay? Even from Wilbur. I’d... I’d attack him to protect you.”

“You shouldn’t have to,” Tommy mumbles. “He should just not *hit me* .”

“Well... yeah, he shouldn’t do that. But if he doesn’t behave... I’m stronger than him, y’know? And I’d do a lot to keep you safe. You’re my brother.” Ranboo is sitting in front of him, fidgeting with his tail, flicking over his lap. That sound is definitely his heartbeat.

He uncurls slightly, and wipes his eyes on his sleeve. “Thank you,” he says, trying to dry his face further. “S-sorry.”

“Don’t be,” he says firmly. “I’d be surprised if that didn’t upset you, Tommy.” He reaches out his hand, but doesn’t look offended when he doesn’t take it. “Is there anything I can do to help you feel better?”

He shrugs a little. “I dunno. Just...” He runs a hand through his messy hair. “I don’t know why I got so scared.”

“He’s hurt you, hasn’t he? Sometimes apologies are... upsetting, when that’s happened.” He picks at his tail, swirling his fingertip in the fur.

Tommy brings his legs in closer. “It... wasn’t just that,” he mumbles. “Um. He reminded me of... of Dream.”

Ranboo goes still, blinking rapidly. His eyes flicker towards the forest, and his green eye seems to glow. “Oh.”

“Yeah,” he agrees. “It sucks.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Yeah. I am too.”

“Wilbur isn’t...” Ranboo trails off. “He’s not *like* Dream, is he?” There’s a note of fear in his voice, and his eyes are wide. Tommy doesn’t blame him, considering his late-night meetings with Dream and how eerie they can be.

(“Dream did something to me after I was stabbed... I don’t know what, but I was *bleeding*...”)

“He’s not as bad as Dream,” Tommy admits. “He isn’t as violent, at least. And- and I know he doesn’t want to *hurt* me like Dream did. But I can’t help but be... be scared of it.”

Ranboo isn’t fidgeting anymore, instead sitting very still. The only thing moving on him are his ears, which are all twitchy. “I... I don’t think he’s going to do that either,” he says

carefully. "I feel like I would know. And I can't imagine him doing something like that. So we're safe from that, at least." His right ear twitches up, making his star-and-moon-shaped earrings and the thin chains between them jingle.

"Yeah," he agrees, exhaling shakily, as he sinks back against the porch wall. "He's just going to be his own kind of... awful."

-

"Techno? Can we talk?"

Wilbur tries not to flinch at the unimpressed expression on his brother's face. *God*, if looks could kill.

"Sure," Techno says after a moment. He laces his fingers on the tabletop. "We can talk."

Niki, who's stirring her tea at his side, tilts her head slightly. "Do you want me to stay and mediate?" She asks without hesitation. Wilbur feels fiercely fond of her.

"Nah, we'll be fine." He sips from his own cup of tea. "Mind steppin' outside for a minute?"

"Of course," she says, picking up her cup and getting to her feet. She kisses Techno's cheek and squeezes his shoulder. She goes to walk outside, and as she passes, she gently touches Wilbur's arm, giving him a half-smile of encouragement.

Wilbur's breath shakes a little as he sits down across from Techno.

It went so badly with Tommy. Tommy *fell apart* because he apologized to him. It could go even worse with Techno.

Techno can get violent at the best of times...

He fidgets with his hands. "So." He picks at his nails. "I, ah. I want to apologize to you."

"Do you, now." Techno's voice is cool and disinterested. He idly stirs his tea, spoon clicking on the cup.

Wilbur nods, trying to rally himself. "I do. I know I've hurt and- and betrayed you, I've made you feel like shit. I-I went and *died* and I know that couldn't have been easy for you. We were..." he hesitates. "We were starting to get along again, and I fucked it up."

Techno, eyes haunted in the campfire light. Framed in memory, Wilbur can see how concerned he was, how he listened to his rants with worry.

Techno, late one evening, sitting with him while he smoked, not talking but listening to him the whole time. The only thing he said was "you should stop that and go to sleep."

(Techno was the one who originally found out he was smoking, back when he was fifteen or so. He has a keen nose, and he smelled the smoke on his clothes well before he thought it was obvious.

“I’ll tell Phil,” he threatened, and for all his faults, he’s sure he thought he meant it. “You know that’s awful for you.”

“Yeah, I *do* know,” Wilbur said, with an eye roll. “I don’t do it often, c’mon. I just smoke with Schlatt sometimes.” He tactfully didn’t mention that they often smoked *more* than just cigarettes.

“It’s still terrible,” he insisted, stubbornly crossing his arms. “If I smell that stuff again...” he threatened, narrowing his eyes at him.

He never did tell on him.)

“Well, I’m glad you can finally see how much you’ve fucked up.” The poker face is back, he notices. The brief time of Techno’s emotions being so clear has come and gone, and now he can’t read him. Everything is controlled; he’s keeping his cards close to his chest.

“I can,” Wilbur says, biting into his lip until it hurts. “And I want you to know that I’m sorry, genuinely. I’m so, *so* fucking sorry for what I’ve put you through, Techno.”

Techno sips his drink slowly, staring him down with incredible malice in his dark eyes. He has... he has vertical pupils, slitted like those of a cat. How did he never notice that?

He sets his cup down with a bit too much strength. “I don’t believe you,” he says flatly. “And even if I did, I don’t think you deserve forgiveness. Mostly for what you’ve done to Tommy.” His right hand settles on the tabletop and he taps his claws on the wood. “You’re apologizin’ because you got in trouble, but frankly, I don’t think you can make up for what you’ve done. If I had it my way, you wouldn’t have been brought back.”

Something about Technoblade *always* makes Wilbur want to argue. Maybe it was being teenagers at the same time, or all the emotional turmoil they’ve been through, or maybe it’s something else entirely.

But regardless of the cause, anger fills the places his anxiety had only moments ago.

“Then why was I?” He asks, his voice cool. He can tell Techno notices the shift, because his brow raises just slightly.

“Because Phil felt like he had to.” He blinks at him, expression not shifting at all. “I let it happen for his sake, not yours.” He’s still tapping his fingers. “Maybe I should have pushed back a little more, because you’re just makin’ him feel worse.”

He’s upset by how deeply that statement cuts. Maybe he shouldn’t be, he knows what he did but- it hurts a little.

And pain makes him want to lash out.

“It would have worked if you pushed back on it,” he spits, sitting back in his chair with his arms crossed. “You’re his favorite. You could persuade him to kill me again, he loves you that much more.”

Techno rolls his eyes, a mean smile coming to his lips. “I can’t believe you’ve throwin’ that in my face now. We’re *adults*, Wilbur, act like it.”

“You’re not denying it.”

“Are you really that much of a child, that you’re still angry at me for *his* decision to play favorites? I had no hand in that.”

“No, you just reaped the benefits.”

A crack in the facade-- his mouth twitches back into a frown and his eyes narrow slightly. The hand that was tapping on the table curls into a fist. “And what benefits would *those* be?” He asks, and there’s the slightest edge of something sweet and poisonous in it.

“He’s always gone to you before anyone else. Even when Tommy and I have been hurting, he’s always cared about you more.” He bites his tongue before he spits out too much.

Techno’s jaw tightens slightly. “That’s not my fault, I never asked him to do that. I was a *kid*.”

“Even as an adult, he’s cared more about you. Why do you think *you’re* the one who reconnected with him after you moved out?”

“*Because I went to him*, Wilbur! I put the effort in, I didn’t go off and do all the stupid things you’ve done!”

Wilbur stands up so quickly his chair almost falls over. “You’ve done a *lot* of stupid shit, Techno! You’re worse than I’ve ever been, but you’re still his favorite, and I know that you’ve always known it!”

Techno stands as well, both hands in fists, anger flaring in his gaze. “At least I’ve *tried* to be better!” He snaps, and his lip draws back slightly, showing off sharp teeth. “You haven’t tried! You’ve just kept gettin’ worse, because you’ve never accepted you *need* to change!”

“Well, I have now! And you won’t give me a fucking chance, because you keep acting like I’m going to snap--”

“Because you haven’t proven that you *won’t*! You snapped fuckin’ days ago, and I don’t believe for a second that you won’t do it again!” He gestures at the door to Tommy’s room. “You keep hurtin’ the one person who’s *always* been on your side! You don’t want to be forgiven for what you’ve done, you just want your *loyal little follower* back!”

Wilbur lets out a sharp laugh and roughly runs his hand through his hair, pulling at it out of stress. “No matter what I say, you’re not going to ever forgive me! I’m being honest, I want

to be forgiven, but *none of you fucking believe me!* ”

Techno sweeps his hair off of his shoulder, crosses his arms, and meets his eyes with something between anger and pity in his expression. “There are some things you can’t be forgiven for. Trust me, I know.”

He rolls his eyes, moving his hand down from his head to steady his chair and sit down once more.

Suddenly, a storm of pain flares on his left cheek, hot and intense, and he gasps, instinctively ducking his head and drawing his whole body in to try and protect himself.

When he looks through his hair, Techno is looking at him with his eyes wide, his breathing noticeably loud. His hand is shaking, held near his chest.

Wilbur connects the dots quickly. When he moved his hand, Techno felt threatened. So he punched him.

He isn’t even mad. He’s just heartbroken that he made him react like that. Techno is violent, but not *needlessly* so. Not with people he knows. With strangers, maybe.

But Wilbur isn’t a stranger.

Or maybe he is. He’s not sure, anymore.

They stare at each other, for what feels like forever but is really only a minute or two. Neither of them move.

Behind them, he can hear a distinct enderman sound, like one being startled, before the door to Tommy’s room slams shut.

Techno unfreezes, concern creasing his brow. He looks over at the door, eyes widening and becoming softer. “Fuck,” he mutters. His gaze flicks back to Wilbur, and there’s nothing but worry in his eyes, all anger disappearing.

Wilbur lets out a slow breath, and sinks into his chair. He rests his head against his arms, sinking down against the table.

“I- okay. We can talk about this another time,” Techno’s voice is much gentler. “I handled this... really badly.” It’s surprisingly mature of him to say that. He feels both fond and

frustrated. "I need to go talk to Ranboo."

Hurried, he goes around the table and walks across the room. Wilbur listens to his footsteps as he opens the door, enters the bedroom, and closes it behind him with a small click.

He stays with his head in his arms.

After a few minutes, the front door opens, letting in a wave of cold air and Niki's light footsteps. She doesn't speak, but he hears her walk to his side.

Her hand, cool from the wind outside, rests on his shoulder. The gentle touch feels as searing as fire.

"I heard all of that," Niki says gently. "*I* believe you, do you know that?"

He chuckles against his arm. His sleeve is wet with tears. "Yeah, I know. Thank you."

"They can believe you, too," she says, and her hand moves to pat between his wings. "It'll just take work."

"Right," he agrees. "It will."

She leaves him be, after that.

-

"Ranboo?" Techno asks, closing the bedroom door behind him.

Ranboo curls up further in the gap between his bed and the wall. Terror surrounds his lungs like cold water, burning him from the inside, and on the heels of it comes a sickening betrayal.

Techno was supposed to be the good one. The safe one, ironically. The one who only hurts when he must.

But he didn't need to hurt Wilbur. As awful as he is, even as he hit Tommy, he doesn't need to hurt him.

He did, though.

He can see Techno's strong fist hitting Wilbur's thin cheek. He couldn't have hit too hard, because he didn't bleed or anything. But still. He *punched* him.

Techno sits gingerly at the edge of Tommy's bed, fidgeting with the hem of his sweater.

"I'm sorry you saw that," he says, surprising him in how genuine it sounds. "I... wasn't actin' right. I got scared, but that's not an excuse." He runs a hand through his hair, messy and loose and long. "I know you've... seen this kinda thing before, and it must be scary. I don't want to make this anymore stressful for you. I don't want to hurt you."

Ranboo watches him from his place next to the bed.

His mind fleetingly offers him *he would've hurt you by now if he wanted to*, which is true. He's sparred with him a few times, since Phil taught him some sword fighting basics.

And it would have been so easy for Techno to trip him, to shove him into the snow and make it look like an accident, even if his face burned...

But he didn't do that. He was gentle, and helped him up carefully every time he was knocked over, and made him hot cocoa when they got back inside because he was cold.

That's not how abusive people have acted to him before. So maybe...

Maybe...

Ranboo climbs out of the small hole he was sitting in, and sits down on his bed. He grabs his enderman plush and holds it to his chest, feeling very small for how big he knows he is.

"Why did you do that?" he asks. His voice comes out tearful.

Techno sighs. "I was scared. I thought he was going to hurt me. It doesn't excuse it, but that's what I thought was going on." He rubs the back of his neck. He always looks so awkward in this room, like he doesn't fit, his broad shoulders and strong arms looking somehow wrong. "I shouldn't have reacted like that. It was... childish, and pretty dumb." He gives a humorless laugh. "Like I said, I'm sorry you saw that."

Ranboo picks at a stray thread on the enderman's plush body. "He's hurt you before, so... I-I guess that makes sense." His throat feels tight. "But you didn't need to hurt him back."

"That's true," he agrees. "I didn't need to."

He stares down at his lap. "Are you gonna do it again?" He asks hesitantly.

Techno snorts a little, a very piglin sound. Ranboo flinches. "That wasn't a bad noise, sorry. I... I won't do it again, no. Unless one of us is actively in danger, I'm not goin' to get into a fight with him again." He gives a strained laugh. "I don't actually *like* hurtin' people."

Ranboo frowns. He's not sure if he entirely believes that, but he *does* believe that he would fight to protect them. Hm.

"You don't have to forgive me," he says. "I scared you, and I did something that I know scares and upsets you. What I intended doesn't matter."

Ranboo peeks up through his hair. Techno looks... almost frustratingly genuine, his hands clasped on his lap, his head tilted as he looks at the wall like it's very interesting to him. All he can feel from him is guilt and sincerity.

"I don't think you'll do it again," he says. "That's... that's what matters to me, I think."

He looks at him, and receives a hesitant, crooked smile. "I won't," he promises. "Do you want me to leave you alone for a bit?"

Ranboo smiles back, not quite as wide. "Yes, please. I just... need some space."

"Of course." Techno stands up, brushing nonexistent lint and a feather or two from his pants, and turns to leave the room. "I hope you feel better after a bit."

"Mmm-hm."

He opens the door, hesitates for only a second, before stepping out. The door clicks shut after him.

-

After dinner, Wilbur goes for a flight, and comes home to find the house quiet. When he goes inside, Techno, Tommy, and Ranboo are already in bed. The dishes are done. Niki has gone home, and he notes that her fur-collared cloak was left behind, laid over the arm of the couch.

The only person still up is Phil, who's sitting in front of the fire. He's cleaning his sword, by the looks of it.

Wilbur hangs up his coat, and sets his boots on the neat wooden rack by the door. All the shoes are lined up neatly; Techno's gold-embellished boots, two pairs of Tommy's shoes, one pair of Niki's...

He runs his hand through his hair. He's not tired enough to sleep yet.

"Wil?"

He freezes.

Phil turns away from the fireplace, and smiles at him just a little in the dimness. It makes him feel oddly disgusting inside. "Come sit with me?" He asks, gesturing at the rug.

Wilbur swallows hard, and nods, following obediently. He sits down next to him, drawing his legs up to cross them.

Things are quiet for a moment, just the creak of the cabin and the fire crackling and the wind outside.

"I heard you and Techno arguing earlier," Phil says, calm, and he goes back to cleaning his sword.

He winces. "Yeah, we... got into a fight." His jaw hurts, but it's not as bad as it could be. Techno didn't hit him hard enough to hurt him severely, and he's perfectly capable of it. "I... I don't know if you heard, but I'm trying to... apologize."

He wipes off the shiny netherite blade. It's decorated with gold flowers, roses maybe, rendered in a graceful hand. It's Techno's work, he recognizes it. "I did hear, yeah. And I'm very proud of you for trying to do that."

The (mild) praise is enough to make Wilbur warm inside and he wipes his eyes on his sleeve. "Really?" he asks, voice cracking.

Phil looks up from the sword, and smiles again, wider and more genuine. "Of course," he says softly. "I... I've been holding back from you, these past few days, because of what happened. Honestly, I was scared. Not of you, but of how I didn't do what I needed to, to help you, to stop that from happening." He sets the sword aside, and offers a hand. "It hurt me a lot, seeing all of you like that. I never... I *never* want to see any of you hurting again, if I can stop it."

He laughs and places his hand in his. He's crying a little and he isn't sure why it's happening so quickly. He had no emotions for ages, and then in the space of less than a week, he gets them all back in a flood of rage and tears and guilt.

"I-I don't want to hurt any of you anymore," he says. "I don't like the person I've been for the last... while." He's not sure how long it's been. Years, at least. "But they don't believe me. When I apologize."

He gets no response, just a heavy gaze settled on him, and he feels defensive and upset. "I don't feel like they'll ever believe me," he says, slightly whining. "Tommy is so scared of me, and Techno- he *hit* me..." He touches his jaw with his free hand. *I mean, I deserved it*, he thinks. "I don't feel like I can convince them, or if it's even worth it..."

His breathing hitches, and he places his hand over his face, suddenly overcome with a sob. How did he get upset so quickly? Wasn't he supposed to be avoiding crying? Because it makes people guilty... and he should be apologizing to him, too...

He's a wreck. He hiccups and forcefully wipes his face. "I'm sorry. I'm *trying*, I promise. I-it's just hard and I don't know if I can do it, if it's even worth it, if they even want me... no, I *know* they don't want me..."

"Wilbur," Phil says softly. "Of course they want you. Both of them still love you, a lot. They just..." He sighs. "We've all been through a lot, so it'll take more time. You have to show them that you really mean it this time."

He looks at him somewhat suspiciously. "How do you know they want me? I think... I'm *pretty sure* they hate me, Phil."

His eyes soften significantly. "Wil, after you died, Tommy was practically unresponsive for *days*. He just went through his day in a daze, because he was so hurt by losing you. Techno spent the better part of a few weeks crying through everything he did. They love you, they want you around. They're just... scared." He can hear him swallow. "I'm scared too, honestly."

They fall silent for a little while. Wilbur has a pit in his stomach when he thinks about how broken he must have made them.

They haven't been happy in years. And he's part of that. A more than significant part of it, too...

Tommy's big blue eyes, sparkling with life, when he was only a tiny fledgling, compared to the cold, greyed-out young man he sees today. Techno's strong personality, all hard opinions, fierce interests, bright love, compared to the angry, bitter, *paranoid* traits he shows now.

How could he have let that happen to them? He's supposed to be their big brother. Their protector.

And he failed. Over and over, he *failed*.

"I heard something else, when you were arguing with Techno," Phil says, and there's something different, cold yet vulnerable, in his voice.

Wilbur begins shivering, despite the fire.

"Do you... do you genuinely think I would've let you stay dead, if Techno told me to?" He's looking into the fireplace, and there's a distinctly haunted expression on his face.

He exhales, a bit shaky. "I... yeah, honestly. I do," he says, laying all his cards on the table. There's no use in lying, not tonight. "I believe that you would do pretty much anything for him. Because he's your favorite."

Phil sighs, running a hand through his hair. It's gotten so long, it almost looks like it did when he first took Wilbur in. It shimmers a bit in the firelight.

"I suppose I deserve that," he says, quiet. "I *did* play favorites for a long time, which wasn't fair to any of you, not even Techno." When Wilbur opens his mouth to rebut the idea, Phil arches his brow at him. "Do you think he never *noticed* how my attention was usually on him? Do you think it never made him feel *guilty*?"

Wilbur's jaw tightens.

"He's known for a long time. And you might not want to admit it, but he can be a pretty emotionally driven person." He rubs his forehead. Suddenly, he looks much older than he should. A thousand years have collapsed atop him like books from a broken shelf. "We've argued about it before. And... well. You two have about the same feelings; you both think I'd do anything for him, even to the detriment of you and Tommy."

"And... that's not true?" Wilbur asks, watching his father cautiously.

Phil exhales, a bit shaky. "I want to say it isn't, because I don't want to admit that I've played favorites like that. But it is true, in some ways." He rests his cheek against his fist. "It's... stupid, and selfish, and a really ridiculous way to go about things. But before, I felt like I understood him better, so I naturally focused on him more. And doing that *repeatedly* led to you two- and Tommy as well, I'm sure- to think I only care about Techno. Which isn't true. I

care about all three of you so goddamn much. But I can't lie and say I haven't focused on Techno far, far more than I should."

"He kept getting himself into trouble, when he was younger," Wilbur mumbles. "I always thought he was doing it for your attention. Like, he knew how much you... *preferred him* over us."

Phil chuckles, the sound empty and sad. "No, he didn't do it on purpose back then. He just had exceptionally terrible luck."

He looks so tired, and Wilbur feels guilty for what he said during that stupid argument. He regrets it so strongly it makes him feel a bit sick. It's like when he was a kid, maybe thirteen or so, and was so angry he just told him... told him he *hated* him. Just like in that argument, he was lashing out.

He's pretty good at that.

He pulls his legs up to his chest and rests his chin on them. He feels small.

"I would have brought you back even if he argued against it," Phil says, not looking at him. "I promise, I would have. I owe you that."

Wilbur watches him for a long moment, frowning, before nodding slightly. He doesn't know what to say, but he isn't pursued for further comment.

They sit in silence for a while.

-

Dream strikes the rock with his pickaxe, feeling it crumble, the impact making a jolt go through his arms and shoulders and back.

Stone crumbles away, and he begins picking at the small seam of iron he's found. It's a mindless enough task.

He can't kill Technoblade. Not now. He'll need *months* to come to terms with the idea. Not to mention the preparations he needs to make.

Enchanted weapons. Armor. Maybe even potions. Techno is stronger than him by now, even possessed, and he'll have to take him off his guard to succeed.

Not that he wants to succeed.

"This is the lesser of two evils," he reminds aloud as he works on the iron. "Techno isn't a kid. He's an adult. This is better, if only by a little."

He can still remember how Techno looked as a kid, though.

Big, gold eyes, pale eyelashes, a crooked smile with slightly crooked teeth, wild hair always in some level of disarray and mess. Flower crowns and gold jewelry and scraped knees. Days

spent wandering the forest together, talking about everything and nothing, taking naps under trees or in the lavender field after exploring a cave...

Dream's heart hurts. He's used to the feeling.

Behind the iron is more stone, darker in color. Deepslate.

He keeps mining through it.

He's getting experience. That's what he'll say when the demon asks. He needs to heavily enchant his weapons.

He knows it won't believe him. It never does.

"I can't do this," he says to himself, forcing the words out as he digs deep into the stone. "It's going to kill me inside. There's... Not a lot left of me for it to kill."

His pick opens up a sizable hole in the wall, and a cheerful voice says "That's not true!"

Dream jolts back, immediately on the defensive. His hand drops his pickaxe and goes for his sword, hanging at his belt.

"You've still got a lot to kill!" The voice says. It's accompanied by a... Squishy sound? "A lot of *meat*, anyway."

"What the fuck?" He stares into the hole. There's a torch on the wall near him, and he grabs it, shining its light into the gap in the wall that he created.

Green. He can see green. Not moss or a plant, but... a different shade of green entirely.

A slime. There's a *slime* in the hole. Not moving, just sitting in a blob on the ground.

Aren't slimes hostile...?

Suddenly, the amorphous blob of goo shifts, and what looks like a human face appears, complete with a green, strange approximation of hair and big, empty, black eyes.

"Hi!" The slime-with-a-face says.

Dream stumbles back, nearly dropping the torch. His sword clatters to the floor.

He's never seen a slime do *that*. Granted, he hasn't seen a *lot* of slimes; they haven't really showed up anywhere he's lived, but surely he would have noticed if they could do that.

"...Hello," he says cautiously.

The slime smiles, showing off teeth that are a slightly lighter green than the rest of it. "What are you doing in the caves?"

"L-looking for ores."

“Oh, me too!” It smiles wider. “There’s some redstone over there, if you want that. I’m looking for lapis.”

“Why do you need lapis?” he asks, unable to help his curiosity.

The slime bounces a little within the confines of the hole. “For magic! I’m looking for gold too, but I can’t find any.”

Dream briefly considers the possibility that he’s hallucinating. He’s rarely done that before (do his demon sightings count?) but it makes more sense than slimes developing faces and *talking* out of nowhere.

“There’s some gold that way,” he says, waving back into his path. “To the left...”

“Thank you!” The slime grins. “You’re very nice, Dream from nowhere!”

He blinks, surprised. “How... how do you know my name?”

“I know everyone!” A pair of gooey “arms” emerge from its body, and rest on the edge of the hole in the wall. “I know everyone, and see *everything* . So of course I know your name! And I know your boyfriend, and your brothers, and your old best friend!” Its teeth look more... solid and real, now. Is it starting to look like a real person? He can’t tell.

“So... You just watch everyone here? On the whole server?” Dream asks, brow furrowing. “You know *everything* that’s going on?”

The slime nods. Its head definitely looks more like a normal head now. And its arms are more solid. “Yep! It’s fun, there’s always so much going on!”

Dream suddenly feels very tired. He puts the torch back in place on the wall, and then sinks to sit on the floor, pushing his mask aside to let the cool cavern air hit his bare face. His bag, full of ores, falls to his side, clunking dully.

He turns his eyes to the hole in the wall.

The slime, now entirely human-shaped, right down to now wearing clothes and a pair of thick-framed glasses, is climbing out of the hole.

He doesn’t even know what he expected.

“Hi!” The slime says, holding a hand down to him. “My name is Charlie!”

Dream raises an eyebrow. “I didn’t know that slimes have names. Or... bodies.”

‘Charlie’ blinks rapidly. There are no sclera to his dark, empty eyes. “I’m not a slime!” he says, voice going a bit high. “I’m a person! A human! Just like you!” He holds out one of his arms, as if to illustrate his humanity. It’s covered in green, slightly reflective scrapes and small bandages. “I even have bones!”

Dream sighs and rubs his temples. Well, at least this is taking his mind off what he’s doing.

“Yeah, you’re a human,” he says tiredly. “Sure.”

“Exactly!” He grins, bouncing on his toes. “A human, just like you.”

He pauses for a moment, tilting his head, narrowing his eyes.

“Hmm, wait, no. You’re not a human, are you?”

Dream freezes. The words swirl in his head like a wild cyclone.

You’re not a human, are you?

“I’m human,” he says, his mouth moving in what feels like slow-motion.

“You’re not, though,” Charlie insists. “You’re a demon.”

He opens his mouth to say *I’m not a demon* , but he stops himself.

Does he count as a demon? He knows he isn’t... that he isn’t just a human anymore. His sharp teeth and his eyes that don’t properly reflect light and his eerie senses are all proof that he’s not the simple human boy he once was.

But is he a demon?

Any comments? He asks, mostly rhetorically, into his mind. There’s no response. Typical, it’s always around when he doesn’t want it, but the *minute* he has a question...

“How do you know that, anyway?” He asks, deflecting.

Charlie hums and moves to sit down as well, crossing his legs on the stone floor. “I know lots of things! And demons *feel* different from humans, so obviously I know you’re a demon.” He props his chin up on his palms. “What kind of demon are you?”

Dream’s mouth feels a little dry. “I... don’t know,” he lies. “Why do you ask?”

“Oh, um! I’m... *researching!* Yes, I’m researching demons. I’m definitely *not* just helping someone else research, and he *didn’t* send me down here because I kept bothering him! Nope, I’m the one doing all the work, all by myself!” He grins, as if his speech is at all believable. Dream is somewhat reminded of listening to children talk, but in a grown man(?)’s voice.

“...Right,” he says. “Since you’re researching demons, do you, uh, know of any way someone could get a demon to- like, *stop* possessing them? Just... Out of curiosity, of course.”

Charlie’s eyes widen further, somehow. They’re way too big for his face already, and it looks uncanny. He’s doing a pretty okay job of looking like a human, mostly, but the eyes are throwing it off *so much* . Too dark, too big, too reflective...

“That’s *part* of my research,” he says, his voice a pitch higher. “But I’m not supposed to talk about it!”

Dream raises his brows. “You’re not *supposed* to talk about it?”

“Yep, it’s a secret!” He grins. “Secret research, you know.”

“...You’re *incredibly* weird,” he says. “Right, okay. It’s a secret, and you can’t tell me. Cool.”

He runs a hand through his hair. His ponytail comes loose, and blonde strands crowd his face. Dream scowls. *God* , he needs a haircut; he knows he looks awful.

“Okay, you said you know... everything that’s going on here, right?” He waves a hand vaguely, trying to encompass the whole server. “Somehow.”

Charlie nods eagerly. “I see everything around here! It gets overwhelming sometimes; there’s so much going on! But then I just stop being overwhelmed. It’s very easy.”

Dream has accepted he’s going to continue being confused. “Yeah, right. So... if I wanted to ask about certain people, you could tell me how they’re doing?”

The slime across from him doesn’t blink enough. Hm. “I could! I don’t see why not.”

He exhales shakily at the idea. “Okay.” Getting to know how his loved ones are doing is... Kind of insane? He’s been so disconnected with them for so long.

When was the last time he saw his brothers? His boyfriend? (Ex-boyfriend, maybe? Did they ever break up? He’s pretty sure they broke up.) Not to mention his friends...

Where to even begin?

Dream can’t stop himself from blurting out “Are my brothers okay?”

It laughs, a weird gurgly kind of noise that isn’t human at all, and nods its head. “They’re okay!”

He relaxes slightly. “Good.”

He can’t check on Sapnap, because he can’t get into Kinoko; he tried once, and nearly got his head taken off by Quackity, wielding an axe and more rage than he’s ever seen on *anyone* , probably. He had always considered him to be even-tempered, and kind of unintimidating, but... Not anymore.

And Purpled... He has no idea where he even *is* , and he’s fairly sure that one’s intentional. He always did like his privacy and isolation.

The part of him that’s always going to be a worrisome big brother swirls with questions about that. He’s still so *young* , only seventeen or so, but he’s all on his own. He’s freakishly competent, he was even when he was a kid, but it still *bothers* him.

(“Where were you?!” Dream threw his arms around Purpled’s tiny, skinny frame, and hugged him close. “We ran around the whole forest looking for you! I’m so glad you’re okay!”

Purpled went very tense in his grasp, but didn't pull away, nor did he hug him back. "Um. I just went for a walk," he said cautiously. His voice was still drowning in a Nether accent, hard for Dream to place but very distinct. "Was I... Gone for long?"

He hugged him a little tighter, comforting himself with the presentness of his body. "You were gone for *two hours*. I had *no* idea where you were. If you're gonna go running off, please tell me first, okay?"

His little brother shifted and wiggled a bit in his arms. "Okay. I'll tell you." He chirped a little, tiny and enderman-like. "...Let go, please?"

Dream did as asked nearly immediately, pulling his arms from around him and somewhat sheepishly rubbing the back of his neck. Purpled looked at him with huge, bright eyes, clear confusion on his face.)

He worries less about Sapnap. He's not alone. He has two boyfriends(?) who treat him very well, from what he's seen. And George is with him, too. There are people around him.

He's not alone.

(It's somewhat a lie. He still worries a lot about him.

He still thinks of him when it's cold and rainy, hoping he's keeping himself inside so he doesn't get sick.

He still thinks of him when he smells smoke.)

"How is Sapnap doing?" He asks, trying to sound casual. It fails spectacularly, because his voice cracks. "He's okay, right? I can't get into Kinoko, so I can't find out on my own."

"You shouldn't go there," Charlie says cryptically, offering no further details. "But he's okay. I'm *best* friends with Quackity from Las Nevadas, and they're engaged, so I hear lots about him." He straightens up, pride showing in his bright grin. His tongue is green behind his impeccably white teeth. "Sapnap is fine. He's happy, surrounded by friends and everything. He's spending a lot of time with his friends, actually. I think he's learning more about how to control his fire, but I haven't been taught about that kind of magic- o-or, um, it hasn't come up in my research."

A sense of fierce longing settles in Dream's chest, as fiery as his little brother, curling behind his breastbone.

In another world, a *better* world, he'd be getting to see all of this firsthand. He'd be meeting Sapnap's friends- his *partners*, too- and he'd be one of the first people to see whatever he's learning to do with his fire powers. He'd be right there, supporting him.

Dream wants to cry. He sniffles and pretends it's from the stone dust in the air.

He pushes himself up from the floor. "Thank you," he chokes out, forcing himself to check his tools in order to not look at Charlie. And then, to satisfy his own worries, he clears his throat a little and asks, "Has he gotten sick? It's been rainy, right?"

“Nope!” Charlie joins him in standing up. Helpfully, he picks up Dream’s sword and hands it over. “That was months ago. He didn’t get sick then, either. He stayed inside.”

Dream wants to melt into a puddle of relief. “That’s... that’s good,” he says, shaking his head a little. “He’s okay, that’s good.” He ties his hair up again, and briefly leans on the wall. He’s so very tired.

“Are you alright, Dream from nowhere?” Charlie asks in a remarkably kind tone. His eyes sting a little; no one has spoken kindly to him in so long... “You look upset.”

Dream snuffles again, and he wipes his eyes on his hand. There’s dirt on his gloves and it irritates his eyes, but he can blame his tears on that anyway. “I’m fine. I’m just... I’ve been worrying about him a lot. I can’t check up on him, so...”

Charlie bounces next to him, his glasses somehow not moving. Are they part of his, uh-body? Sure, why not. “I don’t blame you,” he says cheerfully. “They would kill you if you went into Kinoko, after the last time you came around.”

For some reason, Dream’s hand goes to his throat, and an odd, tingling phantom pain-like sensation spirals down his chest, out to his shoulders, to his stomach.

He doesn’t remember the last time he- or the demon, really- went to Kinoko, but he knows it was bad. He was aware of pain. Of pink light. Of a sense of loss. But nothing specific.

He shakes his head and starts walking down the stone hall he’s made. Charlie follows eagerly.

Should he ask? Does he even have the *right* to ask? Dream can’t deny the curiosity that burns on the edges of his mind every time he hears about something “he” did during the yawning pockets of absent memory, but having those gaps filled is never a pleasant experience. The best he can ask for is something mundane or just odd- like when he learned that he apparently ate a piece of metal for no reason. Just- chewed and swallowed a literal chunk of metal. Some knowledge leaves you with more questions than answers, he supposes.

But it might be- it could be good. To know more about whatever happened in Kinoko. That might help him avoid future risk and give him ammunition he could use later to talk the demon out of doing something stupid like trying to return.

“You saw what happened the last time I went to Kinoko, right?”

“I sure did!”

Dream nods, pursing his lips as they turn the corner. His torch casts dancing lights across the methodically carved stone tunnel. “What, uh... What did it look like to you?”

Charlie hums and taps his chin, finger phasing partially into his face before he notices and pulls his hand away. “Well... The first one looked like a lot of blood getting all over everything from your throat getting ripped out. It got smeared all over your clothes and the bed.”

“Wait- my throat-” Dream slows to a stop and grimaces, reaching for his neck again. “Who... Whose bed?”

He already knows what the answer is going to be. That doesn’t make it hurt any less when Charlie cheerfully replies, “George from Kinoko’s!”

“...Okay. Um- you said that was the first one. Were there others?”

“Just one more! That one was outside. Karl from across time turned into a bright light and did something that completely vaporized your entire body. It was pretty cool! Not even Sappnap could see from how bright it was!”

“But you could?”

“I’m very good at seeing things.”

“Right. That’s... Sure. But you think Karl would do that again if I went back?”

“That’s definitely what he told you! Actually, Quackity from Las Nevadas told me it didn’t make sense that you didn’t lose a canon life after what happened. Why didn’t you?”

Dream sighs, shoving his too-long bangs out of his face. “I honestly have no idea.”

“Aw. That’s too bad. It would have been good for our research if you knew why demons don’t always lose canon lives when they’re killed!”

“...*Our* research?”

Charlie blinks with a slight delay from his left eyelid. “Uh, nope! Definitely my research! No one else!”

Dream starts walking again. Charlie once again follows at his heels like a particularly enthusiastic dog.

“...So, Quackity is your best friend, huh?”

“Yep! He found me in a hole one time and taught me how humans greet each other!” Charlie pauses. “I mean, I already knew that, of course, being a human and all, but it’s always good to brush up on old skills!”

“And he told you that it didn’t make sense that I didn’t die,” Dream says. “I guess it would make sense for him to wonder about that if he were, say, helping you out with your research.”

Charlie makes a noise that might be an attempt at a fake laugh. “Well, that would just be absurd! Because it’s just my research, and definitely not anyone else’s, and I’m *certainly* not helping anyone!”

“Of course not,” Dream agrees. So Quackity is researching demons?

Interesting. Depending on what he comes up with, Dream might be able to learn something about the parasitic fucker living in his brain. It'd be tricky to get that information without alerting Quackity or the demon, though; it might be more realistic to hope for Quackity to discover some way to kill him permanently and pass it on to the stronger members of the server- like *Karl*, apparently?

And isn't that a revelation? Karl, all bright smiles and nonchalant jokes and giggles, is capable of vaporizing people. Dream can't quite decide if he's more frightened of the power or comforted that it's being used to protect Sapnap and George.

But what about-

"Purpled. Is he okay?"

"Purpled from the wilderness? He's great! He learned how to teleport with another person recently!"

"Wait- really?" Dream gapes. "He tried for *weeks* to do that when we were younger, but he never could. How'd he figure it out?"

Charlie starts to reply, then seems to catch himself and goes through a series of increasingly exaggerated expressions of stress before settling into something vaguely resembling confusion. "Huh? Figure what out?"

"...Teleportation," Dream says.

"Who's teleporting?"

"Purpled? My brother? Who you just told me learned how to teleport with people recently?"

"Uh- what? Your brother can teleport?"

Dream shuts his eyes and exhales slowly. Charlie's final line of defense seems to be playing dumb to the extreme.

It's yet another milestone Dream is missing out on. He should have been there to cheer Purpled on and celebrate when he finally broke through the wall. A steady ache builds in Dream's chest and he's tempted to end his inquiries here, but there's no way to tell when he'll be given another opportunity to learn about everything he's missing, so squandering this one is a step too shameful for him to bear.

...Why the hell did he have to save the one he dreads most for last?

"And George? How is George doing?"

Charlie looks relieved to be moving on from the previous topic, and a spring returns to his step as he eagerly replies, "Oh, he's miserable!"

Dream stops dead and nearly drops his torch. "What?"

“He’s miserable! He tries very hard to make Sapnap from Kinoko and Karl from across time and Quackity from Las Nevadas think that he’s doing well, but he cries a lot and freaks out when flowers show up in his house. It kind of freaks me out, too, so I understand!”

This is too much to process. Dream’s mind picks one detail to fixate on. “Wait- flowers show up? What? Like, someone drops them off?”

“Nope! They just appear! Even when I pay close attention, I can’t see how they get there. It’s pretty weird!”

“...Yeah,” Dream breathes, fear seizing his chest. “But you would be able to see if someone invisible carried them in, right? Like, you’d see them floating through the air?”

“I sure would!”

“And that isn’t what’s happening?”

“Nope! One minute there’s nothing, and the next, the flowers are there!”

Dream furrows his brows and stares at the flickering shadows on the walls. If it isn’t an invisible person, then there are really only two other reasonable explanations. An ender hybrid could be teleporting the flowers into George’s house, but that seems pretty unlikely; Ranboo hasn’t left the arctic in a long while from what Dream understands, and Purpled just wouldn’t do something like this even as a joke.

So it must be the other thing.

They exit Dream’s tunnel into the small cavern he took care to properly light up earlier, and as they pass the small pool of water by the tunnel mouth, Dream catches his own eyes in his reflection before sharply looking away.

Relief and jealousy war in his gut. Dream decides he’s too exhausted to bother with that mess and buries it, instead pulling out his pickaxe and heading for the vein of lapis lazuli on the far end of the cavern.

If he’s right about this, then Karl isn’t even the biggest threat to anyone who might try to hurt George. It might be worth it to try asking at some point, just to see if he’ll admit to it; Dream might even be able to convince him to overstep. The flowers are already pushing it, after all. What’s one more act of devotion to the man he loves?

...Then again, if Dream allows that, then George might- well...

George might move on. Might actually, genuinely fall for someone else and leave Dream behind.

He heaves his pickaxe into the earth with a mighty *thunk*.

Dream wants George to be safe.

Thunk.

He wants George to be happy.

Thunk.

He wants George to be free.

Thunk.

But he doesn't want to bear witness to any of that if the price is seeing him in the arms of another man.

Crack.

A piece of lapis dislodges and rolls across the stone. Charlie scoops it up and beams at Dream. "Wow! You were right, Dream from nowhere!"

Dream forces a smile and turns his bitter gaze back to the vein, willing his trembling hands to maintain their grip on the handle. He'll just stay the course. It's fine. Karl will keep him out of Kinoko, and Quackity will find a way to kill him, and maybe, if he's very lucky, that'll happen before the demon's patience for his stalling runs out and Dream is forced to kill Technoblade.

Right.

Because the universe is *so* kind to him.

"...Okay," Dream says after dislodging a few more pieces. "Can you handle the rest? I'm gonna head back the way we came, I think."

"Sure! Thank you for your help!" Charlie says. "It was nice talking with you, Dream from nowhere!"

"Yeah," Dream replies. "You too."

And he means it- enough that he wishes he could stay longer.

But he needs some time to think. So he hooks his pickaxe back onto his belt and heads back into the darkness.

Chapter End Notes

once again, thank you for reading and enjoying my work! i appreciate the support and i love all the comments and such i get on my fics. the support is very important to me! <3

fun fact: this fic was gonna involve wayyy more redemption arc for wilbur, but i kept Having Ideas so that's gonna be a big part of the next one lmao

also wow how about that c!wilbur finale. it's so stupid, i love it personally

End Notes

follow me on tumblr @hydrangeasheart or the harmonica part of piano man by billy joel will never stop playing at a low volume in your ears. like tinnitus, but worse.

(/j)

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!